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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE MCKRACKEN

BY

EUGENE PAUL BUCK

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta
FALL 1991

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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled THE MCKRACKEN submitted by EUGENE PAUL BUCK in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS.

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October 8, 1991

ABSTRACT

The McKracken is a work of prose fiction, a novel of approximately 30,000 words, numbered in 19 sections.

JD McKracken's girlfriend Roberta Jessup is pregnant. The baby is due in mid-January, but McKracken is convinced the birthday will be on January twenty-fifth - Robbie Burns' Day. It is the Curse of the McKrackens: as the baby is born, JD surely will die, as his father did and his grandfather did before him, at the exact moment his son and only child is born into the world. If JD can change history, perhaps he can break the curse.

Burns' Day comes and goes, Roberta Jessup's baby girl comes into the world, and JD McKracken retreats into the past.

As the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory informs us, reality is a function of the observer. Other characters in the novel have their own versions of history and truth, and the technique of intercut story lines is used to reflect this reality.

Just as that other observer, the reader, must build the story out of three different narratives segmented and juxtaposed, so does JD's father, Doodle McKracken, summoned years later to a funeral, try to piece together some explanation of what really happened to JD McKracken.

1.

He should've heard that pibroch wail, those lonesome bagpipes moan.

For he'd been the McKracken, the monster invincible. Not merely a blathering biped, another pestilent ape, instead transfigured by the horrific necessity of his own desire he'd become a power vast and terrible, mighty as oceans and unfathomably silent: the McKracken. The inhuman eyes all-seeing controlling at the hub, tentacles snaking out acid-drooling suckers subterranean slick to grope and pucker tight in the dark eternal night of sea-bottom grottos, finding and feeding the clattering beak, the all-devouring ravenous maw.

The pibroch tune was a prairie air; he could've heard the calling pipes, the chanting of the drones, but McKracken was all too wrapped up in himself to care or take the time.

Because even before that fateful day when his girlfriend Roberta Jessup broke the news to him that she was pregnant, JD McKracken's world had already been coming apart, spinning into disarray, unravelling at the seams as he, like a sea beast on the surface, dragged to drowning in some chugging trawler's net, churned in helpless anguish.

They were at his mom's place in Jackpine, sitting on the sofa. How long his life had been disintegrating into chaos he wasn't aware. But for some reason unknown to himself on this May Saturday afternoon in 1982 -- it was the Victoria Day long weekend, only a few short weeks after Pierre Trudeau patriated home the Canadian constitution, and just a few meagre days after McKracken had read his marks posted at the university and calculated the massive extent of his failure

-- he, the McKracken, monster of the deep, actually thought the tide had turned and things were somehow going his way just because the first days off from his summer job fell on the long weekend, his step-dad Charlie Blenheim and Vera, his mom, were out, beer was in the fridge, and his girl had come down from the city to visit.

It was a beautiful spring day, light and airy, perfect for planting gardens. Yet here they were, inside in the semi-gloom with the TV blaring mindlessly. JD was desperately trying to find some way to let Roberta know he was flunking out of university, that second year mechanical engineering was botched, totally. But he was so afraid to just come out and say it, so afraid imagining what-might-this and who-might-that and how it might hurt him, that he couldn't feel the grief of the person sitting next to him, her heart heavy with what she had driven from the city to tell him, so wound up in himself that he couldn't see the dark circles under her eyes or the pale hands knotted in her lap as she sat there listening to him bitch about his profs.

"They don't care how anybody does," he told her, setting his beer down on the end table and moving closer to her on the couch. "They're never there to help a guy out. All they do is sit back and rake in the big bucks while we cram and sweat."

Roberta didn't say anything; she sat there staring out the picture window, past the fringe of nestling lilac bushes to the weeping birch tree flowing and trailing, delicately ruffling with the breeze in the front yard. Pick-ups drove by piled high with sacks and seed and rakes and kids. They could hear the buzz of rototillers all over Jackpine hill.

"I _know_ I can do better next year," JD vowed, sidling up to her, reaching for her hand. "I just need, you know, somebody to believe in me. Have a little faith."

To be the beast was not enough. Someone else had to see and believe to make the McKracken real, the way Nessie or the Ogo-pogo flirted on the surface, teasing with a glimpse then diving deep. JD's folks were hardly sympathetic so it fell to Roberta to be the one. Or so it had in the past. JD wasn't sure what he expected. Maybe a scolding, surely some hugs. When he glanced up and saw her looking down at him her eye was the hunter's, taking aim.

"I'm pregnant," she said.

If only then he'd listened, JD would've heard it strong and clear: the one piper ghostly far and away calling him to what was hauntingly true.

But the monster McKracken, undulating, writhing, saw the puff of smoke, heard the explosive retort, the whizz of cable paying out, and felt the harpooner's bloody strike and dove shrieking down, down.

"You can't be!" JD bounced up off the couch, staring at Roberta's belly in horror, as if he expected it to swell and burst right there and bloody. "Are you sure? I mean, like a doctor...?"

They'd been going out since high school and had had a bad scare once before when Roberta's period skipped a month. But this time it seemed there was no mistake. Roberta nodded, yes, looking down, picking at the sofa fabric as if something vitally fascinating was woven into it.

"Oh, man!" JD was already in full dread, pacing the living room. How could this be happening? What had he done to deserve this? Kids meant married, meant ball and chain, pumping gas or working construction till doomsday. He stopped in front of Roberta, hands on his hips, demanding, "What're you going to do?"

She looked up at him, eyes widening. "What am I going to do?"

"Yeah," he mumbled, already losing focus, staring past her, through the blank living room wall to some distant watery desolation.

"What am I going to do? You asshole! Like I'm the only one in this thing?"

"Huh? Oh, no, Bobbie, that's not what I meant -- "

But it was what he meant and they both knew it. Yet by the time he realized that, Roberta was up off the couch and gone, through the kitchen and out the back porch, screen door slamming.

"Hey, Bobbie; hey -- Roberta! Wait!"

Shit! Couldn't she at least be reasonable for a second? The neighbours gardening in their backyard had stopped to watch. Roberta threw her bag into the back seat and got in behind the wheel.

"Roberta!" Embarrassed, JD chased after her, trying to make it look like he wasn't. Kneeling on the concrete, arms on the car door, he tried to coax her. "Come on, Bobbie. Just come back into the house."

Her hair hung down around her face as she twisted the key, pumping the gas. The engine caught and she looked up at him, tears in her eyes, streaking her face.

Shit. He felt a jumble of emotions, sad and sorry, hurt and fearful. He thought he knew what he was doing but now he didn't, and he just wanted to hold her.

"JD," she said, her voice surprising him with its strength and clarity, "you can go straight to hell." She backed down the driveway, knuckles white tight on the wheel, and drove off, leaving him kneeling on the cement.

As JD McKracken got to his feet and watched Roberta Jessup's car disappear down the street, people all over town were hearing it: the one piper's lament, gut bag puffed and drones throbbing, chanter sorrowfully stopped and trilling high above the barking dogs and spluttering lawnmowers, the mournful tune rising faint over the shouting laughter of kids running and playing in the sun, heard the crisp melodic twang whining clear and slight like a dozen weed-whippers beyond the clouds tangling in half a hundred tomcats' tails. They heard it, but they knew it couldn't be music, and if it was it wasn't for them, so they smelled the new cut dusty green of lawns and black rich sod of fresh turned dirt, and shovelled their manure and planted their bulbs and forgot what it ever could have meant.

And all that the McKracken was hearing were the voices inside his head: what was wrong with her, why was she doing this to him?

Hands dangling limp, he walked back along the house to the screen-doored porch, face blazing red with shame for what he didn't even know, how could it be his fault? But whatever it was, it was worse that the neighbours so busy in their yards, their ears so astute, wouldn't look up at him or give any sign that they knew too. As he went inside into the slight shade of the house he admitted it didn't matter if she lived in Edmonton now because word would get around and his folks would find out as surely as if she was the girl next door. He went down into the basement without turning on the light, into the cool dark of his room and lay on the bed.

Staring up at the ceiling shadows he saw the way the stricken sea beast sees as, harpooned and wounded, trailing blood and steel it sinks into the sunless depths, the surface slowly fading; her, driving away, tears glistening wet and bright.

Why had she done that? Told him and gone away. Listening to the beating of his heart he felt he'd missed some vital chance, but had no idea what. Pregnant. He couldn't believe it. If he just let her alone maybe she'd come back, maybe somehow things would work out in the end.

Alone in its lair the monster licked its wounds and did not weep.

When JD's days off ended he left Jackpine and went back into the bush to work; out again next go-round he thought about phoning her, but why should he? He couldn't admit to anyone else, let alone himself, how scared he was, so of course he could only be angry at how she'd done him wrong. Before he knew where the time had gone, there he was going off to work again, and on and on, eat sleep work shit, the days slowly lengthening and the nights growing shorter until the moon hung in the balance, the world turned still, and the solstice had come and gone. Paycheque followed paycheque into the bank as JD's summer swelled sweeter, ripening like peas in the pod that would all too soon harden bitter and dry.

Canada Day should've been a holiday but a shift was a shift so he had to work it anyway; when he came home from bush camp for the first time in July he was hot, burnt, dusty, and dreaming tubs of cold beer. His ride dropped him off in Jackpine late in the dusky Tuesday twilight. Bushed, bruised, tired, as soon as he dragged himself into Vera and Charlie's house, chucked his duffel down the dark hole to the basement, and clumped his dusty boots up the landing stairs to the kitchen, his monster senses caught those bad vibes, and the invincible McKracken started to feel that sinking feeling.

Charlie was sitting at the kitchen table, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, a game of solitaire flipped up in front of him and the light from the stove's range hood shining off his bald head.

Vera called from the living room, "JD?"

JD stuck his head in the cool cavern of the fridge, looking for beer. None. Bad sign. He shut the fridge door.

"Your mom wants you," Charlie said, squinting at him through blue wisps of curling, rising smoke.

JD kicked off his boots and, trying to sound hearty, shouted, "Hi mom! I'm home!" He went into the living room, awash in a panic of vertigo. It was school; they'd found out he'd fucked up, but how? He'd intercepted the mail way back in June, shredded the year's final marks and mixed the scraps in with wet coffee grounds and egg shell garbage.

Under the swag lamp in the corner Vera sat in her rocker, hands motionless on her lamp, a tangle with the needles and wool. JD flopped into the easy chair across the room from her. "Man, is it good to be home. You wouldn't believe how bushed I am."

He snuck a peek.

She was looking down at her knitting, her hands moving again, clicking and weaving. "I thought you'd be here for supper," she said.

Charlie drifted to the edge of the room and leaned against the doorway.

What were they up to? The monster deadly smelled hidden danger, wanted to rise up towering in its wrath, with a slathering of foaming drool and the gnash of massive toothed jaws snap them both to bloody bits. But JD could only sit there, paralysed. He heard himself babbling something even he didn't believe about work, and rides, and gravel and time. Then awkward silence.

She didn't say anything, fingers busy, vindictive and twisting. Finally Charlie, so obviously nervously waiting for someone to say something, had to hack and bumblingly begin, "Your mom and me kind a wanted to talk to you -- "

"JD," Vera cut in, looking up quickly, catching his glance and riveting him, "I want to know what's going on."

"Nothing!" JD heard himself protesting, whining like a lying little kid.

She was on her feet, livid. "I want you," she said, accusing finger jabbing at him, "to be man enough to tell me just what is going on. How stupid do you think I am? Do you think I don't notice?"

JD didn't know what to say. Vera was so mad she was practically crying. And he probably couldn't've said anything anyway; he was angry at them both and scared of her and so ashamed of himself, really sick with self-loathing, that if he opened his mouth he'd probably puke.

"Listen, son," Charlie said gently, moving into the living room a little, "you can talk to us. Are you in some kind a trouble? Is Roberta -- "

Her name chilled him. Was Roberta what? JD'd thought the danger was right in front of him: Vera in the middle of the living room, arms crossed, hugging herself tight; but there it was, Charlie with some secret doom, sneaking up on him. Just as JD thought he'd have to spill everything, face them, face himself, Vera cut Charlie off again, "Is it drugs, JD?"

"What?" JD couldn't believe what he was hearing. Drugs? Where was she coming from? Jackpine was a drinking town.

"Vera," Charlie groaned, "for God's sake."

"Don't lie to me, JD. Are you hooked on drugs?"

They'd loomed so terrible but now shrunk so small, so laughable. "No, no, mom, it's nothing like that, nothing at all," JD confessed.

"Vera," Charlie said, "I told you what I heard...."

Heard? About Roberta? What had Charlie heard? The thought of it dizzied him sick. But Vera was hesitant, undecided. They were serious, JD realized, and he would have to give them something, and give it to them now, before things were totally out of control. "It's school, mom," he blurted out, the fear in his voice real. "I just been having some trouble at school, is all."

"What kind of trouble?" Vera was suspicious, but ready to listen.

"With my marks."

"How bad a trouble?" Charlie asked. "You flunk out?"

"He is too bright for that," Vera snapped. "It must be something else."

"I told you what I heard," Charlie said, "but if you don't want to listen -- "

"Mom," JD butt in, "I flunked out of school."

There was a moment of stunned silence, Charlie really surprised to hear it and now uncertain about what he knew he knew, and a look of grim, reassured determination settling like a flush of health across Vera's peaked face. The fight lasted another hour and a half, until Vera was spent. Did he know how much money cost? Did he know how short the future was? Was he trying to spite them by wasting his life? JD didn't have much to say, and Charlie occasionally would try to slip a word or two past Vera about what he'd heard about Roberta, but Vera wasn't having any of it. JD's problem was JD, and that was that, and if his foolishness with that girl cost JD his education then it was high time the foolishness ended; if that girl had problems they were her own, and Vera didn't want to hear about any of it because the boy had too bright a future to throw it all away for anybody, period.

Long after the lights went out that night, long after Vera and Charlie slept, the monstrous McKracken lay awake, snug in its bed, all-seeing eyes open, glowing luminous green in the phosphorescent dark. It may have lost a tentacle, and suffered wounds and scars, but it was safe, sea-weed soft and sea-bottom safe. It had escaped the hunter. All its problems now settled like sediment down into the oblivious ooze, lost and obscured by the unfathomable deep.

In and out of the bush that summer, JD hardly thought of Roberta at all. He was off the hook. Charlie could mope all he wanted; it wasn't JD's problem.

Vera made a few angry phone calls midway through August, and JD had to write some post-dated cheques; when the Labour Day weekend rolled around, autumn cool and leaf lazy, JD borrowed Charlie's pick-up and moved back to the city. Another university year was on, and the McKracken was in.

A cement and steel cubicle barely fixtured with plaster, paint, and a scurf of rough carpet, JD's apartment was on campus, cramped in an H-shaped building three blocks long. Under grimy skylights, through a canyon of student apartments, a mall channeled human traffic past a mercantile gauntlet: soft plastic pastel shades, hard-edged neon advertising, fake plants and the smell of rank meat from the fast-food joints. Video arcades, record shops; disposable crap, disposable money. JD settled into place, vowing he'd study so hard; he would redeem himself. He had a chance to repeat second year.

Classes started and he tried to fall in step with the routine.

September was a fleeting blur; there seemed always to be parties everywhere. The NHL season started in October; maybe the Oilers could go all the way to the cup. His student loan came through and he got some magic mushrooms; Hallowe'en was a blast. Mid-terms were a scrambled mess, hardly worth worrying about. Before he knew it, Remembrance Day had come and gone, the fuzzy-red stickpin poppies just more garbage.

Trees were bare grey sticks and late November was settling in, cold and wet, before McKracken heard that lonesome pibroch whine, the piper playing mournful and distant, faint almost beyond human ken.

Fixing supper one dark and dreary afternoon, he'd been boiling water, cooking spaghetti. The windows were steamed over, trickling cold beads that ran and fell, pooling on the metal panes. He couldn't see out; the condensation was making a mess. He took a plaid tea towel to clear the windows.

Circling round, round in an inward spiral, wiping to the centre, he moved his hand away and saw reflected from the glass features frightening, strange and unrecognizable, that even as he watched, shocked to quavering with deja vu, composed themselves horrifically as his own, unbelievably his own, and left him staring at his reflection staring back at him, left him feeling hollow, supplanted and betrayed.

Then McKracken heard it: the tune a haunting lament, a dirge from somewhere his eyes couldn't see, like the far side of the moon, or behind the back of his head.

It couldn't be music; it couldn't be for him, yet wherever he went in the small cement box there it was, he heard it.

He couldn't eat. He scraped his supper into the garbage. He was too listless to go out. He tried to study but he kept hearing it, bagpipes definitely, slow and solemn, softly bolder, growing hardly louder, as if most imperceptibly the strolling piper neared.

Outside, along the walks and across the brown, dead campus lawns, people streamed and trickled for the shelter of the warm brick buildings.

He tried to study, to read his texts, but the charts and figures ran and blurred. His eyes stung. He wanted to sleep, to go to bed.

But he'd been having dreams. The simplest dreams, nothing, almost nothing, yet such nightmares. A misty moor, hill's knoll stonework framing a doorway, black and open into the damp dark green hillside; approaching, and the wet of mist cold on his face; into the close musty air, the earth, smell of dirt and decay, entering --

Some nights he'd wakened so terrified he actually cried out. Then, heart pounding, sweating, exhausted, he would curl up, hug his pillow and cry into it.

Ashamed.

Haunted, hunted, and hating himself.

The dream image heartbeat pulsing, drumbeat throbbing, sleep would try to pull him under like the dip and splash of oars pulling through unknown waters; gulls wheeling and crying; cries of the crew, the dark beast glimpsed and sounded.

Dire and fearful, was the monstrous McKracken now afraid of the dark?

JD lay on his bed with all the lights on, listening to the piper's slow melody unfold, trying not to think.

Did he sleep? It was evening when he awoke, rumpled in his clothes, lunging upright as the skirling crescendoed, counting on his fingers with the pulse of throbbing drones, figuring how far Roberta was along.

Enough to really be showing.

Now anybody could tell how pregnant she was. The baby, his baby, would be wiggling in the womb, kicking and squirming. Would it be a boy or girl? Would it ever know him?

No, never. He'd lost it forever. Pacing his apartment with slow steps as the tune grounded and softened, he felt history repeating itself. That baby would be just like him, abandoned and alone.

Because the Charlie who raised him was his step-dad Charlie Blenheim, and he, John Donald McKracken, had never known the father whose only son he was.

JD felt sorrier and sorrier for himself, sorry for the little baby who would grow up just like him, abandoned and alone; only at least, at last he sobbed, crying real tears, salty and wet, he had a story to remember, a legend of a once-ago hero buried deep like treasure, not like his only own baby who would hear of his father if at all as its mother scorned his cowardice, yes, say it, coward, coward, the McKracken monster howling loud, thrashing in its death throes, wounded to the quick as sea salt tears quenched parched memory and the creature's mortal spasms wracked open wide the chest to spill the tuneful story out like treasure the sorrowful piper'd waltzed from dirge to spree:

Robbie Burns' Day 1959, black winter night at 4 p.m., sheer forty below and in the cabin in the pines Vera's baby's overdue; prairie blizzard raging, all the lines down, and labour pains start; blood and mayhem, they have to get to town, get to the doctor. Doodle McKracken goes out into the ice-mad storm and fires up the truck. Roads drifted, half-way to town they stall; stuck and stranded, to wait is to die. Doodle wraps the woman tight, bundles her in his coat, and carrying her in his arms strikes off into the teeth of the gale, step after agonizing step through the deadly black frozen night to the Jackpine hospital; little JD is born, Vera lives, and JD's lost father Doodle McKracken, JD's epitome of manly courage and valour, passes on, heart and lungs frost-bitten to the core, expiring as the pregnant woman is pried from his frozen fingered clutch, dying as his child comes into the world, dead at the new-born infant's first cry.

The wailing pipes were calling and JD went where the music led him, through the empty echoing mall and into the halls that smelled of stale sleep, across a walkway hung like a bridge through the night to the library's great double doors and in, past the sleeping guards and the second hand's slow sweep up the stairs to the labyrinth of stacks.

The simple identity of monsterhood had worked like a charm to dispel problems of choice, value, and doubt. Once the mantle of monsterhood had been assumed, the horrific mask of the creature's terrible yet easily identifiable visage put on, all the messy complications of life and human complexity vanished; the dark cloak of night obscured all, save for the glowing eyes of the monster, burning with the lust of single bloody-minded purpose.

And that was all he had left. No claws or jaws, no fangs or poison, only single-minded bloody purpose.

There was something going on out there, under the surface of things. He was alive, wasn't that proof enough? Something out there, manipulating him, giving him fear like a hope there was a chance he could find out.

Was it only a coincidence he'd been born on Burns' Day, sacred feast of the Scots' poetic hero? That his child's mother would be Roberta? That his best friend was named Bruce, his favourite tree the Scotch pine, favourite games golf and curling, and sheep's bellies boiled full of oatmeal an unspeakable delight? Sir John A. his hero? Glenlivet his dearest dram? The o'shanter his favourite tam? Macintosh toffee given him at the MacDonald hotel the only good thing his mother ever did for him? That the lure of a tune only he could hear had led him among the books and set him down between the stacks with a history of the Celts and Scots clutched open before him?

That night and the next day, and the days after, as mechanical engineering slipped failingly away, JD McKracken camped out in the library stacks and read Scotland. He studied pictures of long-gone bearded faces and fog-shrouded heaths, read more and more histories of revolt and rock and croft and bloody usurpation. Somewhere, in those books, he to himself would be revealed. The piper in his head played louder, clearer; now there must be two of them, now there must be three. The tunes changed and the tempos quickened, beating with his racing heart, no longer dirges or waltzes, but strathspeys and reels, hornpipes and jigs. Tapping his feet on the library linoleum, bobbing his silently whistling head, McKracken read the dead, on the trail of what for him needed finding.

Yet insidiously, horrifically, as the late autumn winds moaned winter cold and the night's chill embrace frosted hoary, he could not escape the inevitable: Scotland only led him back to Canada.

Reading a passage in a text, he'd be stirred by a name or a scene, and find himself flipping through indexes, cross referencing to other volumes. Inexorably he moved through faded pages and dry, cracked spines to ever newer bindings, up through time, hurtling closer, nearer, to the hateful present.

He didn't go to classes and he didn't even bother to find out when his Christmas exams were.

The band of pipers in his head played louder, clearer; he could sense the overtones, feel a bass drum beating in their midst.

Charlie called him home for the holidays but JD didn't go.

In the library stacks, following the westward flow, like that which saw the Celts first settle in the isles, he read his way from highlands and low aboard passage to the new world, following the Scots to Canada. Up rivers, along railroads, by foot, ox, cart, horse, steam, and gleaming steel machines he read his way around in one great big frustrating circle to exactly where he didn't want to be: with the Hudson's Bay and the Montreal merchants through the exploration of the west, the dour men at the forts, the Force, the expansion, and the pioneer settlers; the timber cleared, the prairies plowed, the crops planted. Alberta.

Christmas came and went. His research trail had left his apartment a ruin of hieroglyphic scribbles and overdue books, and he still hadn't found what he was looking for.

Himself.

Where was he? Somewhere in all this, he knew.

The old year wound down. Heard only by him, snare drummers had joined the pipe band's ceilidh, rapping smartly. New Year's Eve found him alone, disgruntled, and confused, wrapped in a plaid wool blanket sitting on the wreckage of his rumpled bed. Piles of moldering laundry littered the room. He needed his student loan to come through; he was almost out of money and food. He'd ripped the movie posters down from his walls, the vampires, werewolves and ghouls, and hung instead clan tartans and coats of arms. He'd gone wild on memorabilia, spent money he didn't have on Scottish history and travel books. He'd had a kilt tailor-made, but none of it was enough. He'd toyed with the notion of credit fraud, and travel abroad, but consoled himself with a wee dram and a new line of research: Scots Empire Loyalists up from the States.

It would be midnight soon, another 24 hours, another year. 1983. And what would it matter.

He wanted to get out, get some air. He kicked through the laundry piled in his closet, looking for his coat, and uncovered another pile of library books; about a dozen, on the Loyalist migration, all over-due.

Heaping them in an armload, he chucked them on his bed. He put on his coat. He thought about the fines accruing. He sat down on the bed, picked up a book and started leafing through it, beginning at the back, in the index, looking for his name.

The silent band of pipers paced, gathering strength and breath; drummers marked the time. He heard the rustle of pages, turning through the alphabet, one Ontario history after another.

In the fourth book, tales collected from the clans and septs of Lochiel County, in the index in the back after the MacIlwraiths and Macinstalkers, between the Mcknights and McLaghlans, he found a possibility: a McKracken. He paged to the reference, and there, among the bank swindles and bootlegging, between the hard work and the stillbirths, the pain and loneliness and triumph, he discovered someone to believe in.

The picture of John Donald McKracken showed a young man dressed in the uniform of the Great War, smirking cockily, obviously still too close to home to know what he was in for.

Drums beat a march; JD began to read the slim paragraph.

At the stroke of midnight, when he reached the last sentence that explained how John Donald McKracken of Alexandria township perished in France in 1917, sadly laid low on Burns' 25th, coincidently the same sad sorry day another John Donald, his son and only heir, was birthed at home in the township, five hundred pipers in JD's head wailed as one, joining the drummers in a rousing chorus of "Scotland the Brave."

It was a revelation.

It was his grandfather.

The McKracken recognized truth when he read it; he knew now what he needed to know.

He pulled the phone by its cord banging and jangling out from under the bed and tapped for the dial tone and dialled Roberta Jessup's old number.

It rang.

He waited, not even ashamed he'd never tried it before, not ever that winter, that summer or fall, never called up just to hear her voice and then hang up quick, never called to plead, or beg, or bellow in anger.

"Hello?"

It was her. He could tell. "Auld Lang Syne" was playing on the TV in the background.

"Bobbie," he said.

"JD?"

She would hang up; therefore he asked, letting surprise work its advantage. "When's the baby due, Roberta."

"The eighteenth," she said, as if to herself, and then defensively, "it could be early, it could be late," before animosity awoke, colouring the silence on her end of the wire.

He could feel her grip tighten on the receiver, the muscles in her arm contracting to slam down hard, so he told her, point blank. "Our baby will be born on Burns' Day, Bobbie. Our boy will be born on January 25th."

She cursed him and he hung up, cradling the receiver softly, gently breaking the connection.

He knew, and now she did too. That made it all right. He felt better.

His father had died the day he was born. His grandfather had died the day his father was born. And now him. How long had it been going on? He knelt on the floor and rummaged through the heap, but all he'd found was all that there was.

It was enough.

The drumming was loud enough to blow out the windows; the piping should've brought down the walls.

He gathered up a laundry basket full of books and strolled to the library and dumped them down the book return chute. He wouldn't need them anymore. Soon he wouldn't need anything at all.

His grandfather, his father, and him. He would be dead. On Robbie Burns' day his baby son would be born and he would be dead. It was as simple as that. At last McKracken knew how cursed he really was. At last the miserable pattern of his life made some sense.

The days of January passed with lightning speed, each meticulously marked off on his calendar.

But as he marched around the cold campus in the evenings, his doomed heart full of calm benevolence, overflowing as a sacrificed god's with love for all he beheld, the McKracken couldn't help wondering how different his life would've been if only his grandfather hadn't died that day. Any other, the day before, the day after, but not that particular one, like a pebble of significance dropped in the pool of circumstance, the rhythmic ripples waving out, washing over them all.

McKracken marched and wheeled as the pipe and drum corps marched and wheeled, but he couldn't help blaming his father for dying that day.

Cursed as they, now it was his turn.

As it would be his son's after he was gone. How could he warn him? How could he stop it.

As the clock ticked the 24th away, and Burns' Day was finally upon him, the pipers fell silent, and only the bass drum beat like his heart.

The future held nothing for him. Each present moment was like the same trap repeating itself over and over again.

How could he break the curse? How could he escape?

She was at the hospital now, labouring, he knew it, he could tell without thinking or feeling or calling or asking.

He had to do something. He had to be there.

The McKracken put on his coat, and turned off the lights in his apartment, and left, locking the door behind himself. His footsteps rang hollow as he descended the stairwell. The door was glass and as he pushed on the metal handle he averted his eyes so he would not have to face his reflection.

As he went out into the all too solid darkness of the night, disappearing forever into the swirling whiteout, a vortex of snow that reached like a giant frozen hand in through the open door to deliver him to his doom, it never occurred to him to imagine at all that nothing he believed in might even be true.

2.

Waiting for McKracken that April Saturday, six weeks before she would know she was pregnant, the only person Roberta Jessup recognized in the crowded university pub that afternoon was JD's weird friend Lulu Lewis.

She saw him across the room coming up from the washrooms below, hair spiky black, sharp nose beaked pale, ruffled and glossy as a raven ragged at the end of winter. He was such a pain, the type who always wore too much black and kept his mirrored sunshades on inside. She lost sight of him through the shifting bodies. Good. She didn't like these college kids; she worked for a living, and they got on her nerves.

But she did raise her glass of wine and drank a silent toast to being out of Jackpine, that dreary hick town, and into Edmonton: here's to big city life.

"Hey, Bob-A-Ran!" Lulu Lewis swooped in, grabbed a nearby chair suddenly vacant, and settled in at her table. "I been looking all over for you, Bob."

"How lucky can I be, Lulu."

"Uh, yeah. Sure; say, sorry," he babbled. "I'm not here to stay, just had to give you a message before I split. I saw JD in the library, uh, a couple hours ago, and he asked me to stop in here and tell you he was going to be, you know, burning the ol' midnight whatever, cramming for those exams, so hey, here I am, dropping by to let you know all about it."

"What are you saying, Lewis? Where's JD?"

"Uh, like I said, I was having coffee outside the library this morning, he found me, I don't know, maybe eleven; said 'this afternoon,' so I figured one o'clock, at least, so...."

"Thanks. So much. That's really big of you." It was almost three in the afternoon. JD had known four hours ago he wasn't coming to meet her and hadn't even bothered to call. He had no excuses last night; it was 'baby' this and 'Bobbie I need you' that; she was getting more than a little tired of JD McKracken kneeling in the dark like a sinner at prayer, repenting on her flesh.

She waved her empty glass at her waiter. Lulu quit bongoing on her table so she assumed he was splitting; go, amoeba, go. But as the waiter approached, Lulu leaned across the table, close enough to her ear so he wouldn't be heard above the music. "Hey, can you buy me a beer?"

The waiter came, the waiter waited -- a glass of house white, and -- the bouncers, perhaps?

"Sure, Lewis. Why not." Why shoot the messenger? "Another, and a beer for this person."

"Make it a jug," Lulu said as the waiter nodded and left, then sat there grinning like a fool. "Thanks. I'm a little shy."

"I'm not paying for that."

"Hey, come on, Bob, be a sport."

"Where is JD at, Lulu. Really."

"Studying," he said; elbows propped on table, fringes dangling, his hands were a blurful of taking his shades off, mirrored smears of light and dark; knuckles, fingers rubbing. "Library."

"Which one?" She was almost mad enough to hunt the rat down.

"Shit, man, Bob, I don't know." Lulu's hazel eyes were bloodshot tired. "I been a scrillion places all morning and done a zillion things, and I really don't know where he is. He just asked me to tell you, so I'm telling you, and it's the shits, but that's just the way it is, don't I know it. Fuck, what isn't? I'm totally stressed out." He put his shades back on, revving up. She saw herself mirrored in stereo where his eyes had been. "It's the end of the year, exams, I'm under some very heavy pressure. There's too much shit to do, and my landlord's gone fucking nutzoid on me."

Roberta knew she had options. She could leave. Or she could tell Lulu to get lost. But the waiter came, and she paid for their drinks. Encouraging Lewis to talk about himself was something she usually avoided, but Roberta sat back, and asked him anyway. "So tell me, Lulu, what's your landlord's problem?"

Lulu's landlord, claimed Lulu, claimed Lulu hadn't been paying the rent. And Lulu lacked any receipts to prove he had been paying same. "I trusted him," cried Lulu.

Was Lulu lying?

"Always get it in writing," she advised him, pouring beer into her empty wine glass. "Fiscal responsibility promotes financial health. Keep records." One jug, that's all she was buying.

Lulu chugged; she sipped. It was entertaining, like watching an emotional acrobat. Flapping violently, grousing and complaining; boastful then morose, stolid then manic, occasionally leaning in over the table to bitch conspiratorially. "Fuck, Bob, I need a miracle. I need money, man, heaps of it. Heaps and heaps of it. More than you could ever loan me, shit, more than you could ever make. Like a lottery, fuck that, ten lotteries."

"You buy tickets?"

"You betcha, Bob."

"Ha! You loser."

"Back in a sec." He was up and off. She didn't care where he went and he was back smiling before she could finish her drink and leave. He didn't sit down but just smoothed his empty hand across the table, wiping two twenty dollar bills onto the table top in front of her like magic. "Easy as pie," he said.

"Nice trick."

"Back in a flash."

Lewis flew around the bar, scavenging like a rook from table to table, sitting with the stiff suits, beering with the jocks, some of whose behinds were highly admirable but probably in inverse proportion...to what? Brains? Big deal, what good was that.

After each raid he flapped back to their table, settling into his chair to drink. "Wow, all right. It's a fucking miracle. Can't believe it." He showed her more and more crumpled bills, money his quick fingers folded and pocketed away. "When I need them, my friends come through, man. Have that rent money in no time flat." He was smiling wide. Gave her back ten for the jug and it had only been five; ordered more beer, more wine, ordered fries and gravy, cheeseburgers on the side.

It was good. She liked it.

Lulu got all the money he needed; he bought more beer and she took her glass and her purse and coat and they moved when others did, chairhopping the bar from table to table. She met some of the people she hadn't wanted to meet, and they were surprisingly pleasant; she even went to the washroom, which was unexpectedly clean.

She was impressed. She was having fun.

Coming up the stairs the muscles at the small of her back began to twitch and a chill of gooseflesh crept over her. In her stomach a queasy feeling said: 'time to go.' She thought maybe she'd had too much to drink.

A few couples bopped idly on the dance floor but Lulu was right out there by himself, twitching and flailing.

She escaped the smoke and noise into air alive with all the fresh smells of spring thaw. Snow had shrunk to icy crusts, and blue drifts in the shade. Birds were chirping, lawns were greening; tops of campus towers shone gold and leaf budding trees edged glowing amber and orange against the powdered blue. Somewhere beyond the buildings thick set with day's end shadows there would be a sun, sinking to twilight where the south and the west made a horizon. Thin wisps of cloud drifted high and white above.

Her path was paved and clean and it wound north and east through the university grounds toward the river bank and the bridge. She still felt slightly queasy, almost like she was having mild cramps, but it couldn't be that. She smiled. Whatever it was, walking would take care of it.

The last horrific thing she would have imagined was exactly what was happening: one of her eggs, released by its ovary, was making the monthly march down one of her Fallopian tubes on this egg's only journey to her uterus, where the womb had room, lots of it.

People were everywhere, shucked out of their heavy winter clothes. Clouds of sparrows swept chittering into the evergreens, down to the damp snow. Melted earth; the rich tang of mud; magpies squawking.

She felt better. Almost grateful. Even to Lulu.

Thank you, Lulu Lewis, you jerk, for your weird carousel of tweedy bearded men and cynical women wearing too much eye make up.

She could have taken a bus, a cab. She could have brought her car. The spring air lifted her feet for her. She would walk; she would walk across the campus, and across the bridge, and home. Thank you Lulu, she thought; thanks for the spectacles of light and dark. Thanks for the cheeseburger.

"Thanks for the cheeseburger," she said, stepping off the campus, off the sidewalk curb and onto the street, regular street.

"Hey, no problem," Lulu said, stepping out of nowhere to stride beside her. His hair jolted and sprang with each breezy step. "Anytime. We all gotta eat."

"Uh -- excuse me?"

"Wow." He was oblivious, walking with his head tilted back and the hair dangling away from the unexpected curves of his ears, looking up at the sky. "Wow, check it out."

"Where do you think you're going?"

"It's gonna be dark," he said, glancing at her. "You should've took the bus. Walk you home?"

"Sure, Lewis, you just go on and do that."

They walked pale sidewalks through a cozy neighbourhood of tall old houses, narrow lots fringed with trees and hedges. At the end of the block she asked, "You been through here before?" Across the alley was bush; beyond that a slope cut sheer to the road across the bridge.

"Maybe. Uh, nope."

She did up the snaps on her jacket, slung her purse over her shoulder, and led Lewis into the willows, bending the branches ahead of her as she passed by and letting them whip wickedly back at him, connecting with solid, satisfying smacks.

He struggled to keep up. She surged ahead and skidded down the slick cut, running her momentum out through the bottom of the ditch and up the other side, to the guardrail and sidewalk by the pavement.

Lewis stepped out on air; she saw him hang suspended, then drop. His butt hit, he bounced, then slid down the slick mud to the ditch bottom.

"Aw, Lulu," she said. Roaring traffic sluiced the descending blacktop curves, swept into the dark metal tangle of almost tunnel mouth and vanished, swallowed onto the bridge.

"Holy shit," he got up gasping, wiping the mud off his hands onto his black jeans.

She stepped over the guardrail onto the sidewalk and made tracks north. "See you."

"Hey, wait up!" He climbed out of the ditch and came clomping after her.

When she was well out beyond the sheltering bank, halfway across the bridge, and it was obvious he was still following her, she stopped to lean against the chest high rail, looking down at the moving water, waiting for him.

The sun had set; the western sky flared orange, washed through the spectrum high and bright as if the night would never come. It felt good to be up high, suspended over so much nothingness. Dark beams of riveted steel caged the traffic flashing by; the gusting south breeze had grown to blow strong and steadily.

When he caught up to her he slumped against the railing, winded and sweating. "Oh, man, I gotta quit smoking."

"You jerk. You're a muddy mess."

"This freaks me out," he said, looking over, looking down. "I'm always afraid my shades will slip off."

"So hold on to them."

He flashed her a look. "Bob, sometimes you just gotta let go." He stared over the edge again. "The river," he said. "River of life, river of time."

"What about it?" The very tops of the highrises on the north bank still glittered golden, but the dark cloud that had been a low fringe in the distant southwest was moving in fast.

"Is it a straight line, Bob? Does it actually go anywhere? Or is it a, a vortex, like those whirly things." He pointed down at the swirling muddy river chunked thick with break-up ice.

"Current? Eddies?"

"Yeah, eddies, like whirlpools. Always different but always the same thing over and over again, circling round and round."

The lights on the bridge had come on. Billowing dark clouds swept in above, draping the sky closed. A curtain of grey blurred the south river bank. A few fat drops fell. The wind smelled electric with coming change.

"Rain," she said.

"This is freaky. A muscle spasm, an impulse is all it would take to make me jump."

"At least here you'd get to splash down."

"And as soon as I jumped I'd know it was a mistake but I'd be falling and it'd be too late to take it back."

She saw the sunglasses sliding down his rain beaded nose; she reached over to push them back into place but he stood up defensively and grabbed at them. His hands moved quickly but the glasses were falling, gone.

She laughed; it looked like he'd thrown them over on purpose.

"Hey! Shit!" He lunged against the rail, clutched futilely at empty space.

They both watched the tiny splash. Then nothing. Swirling mud and ice.

Wind driven rain slashed hissing at them out of the southwest. She moved to shelter by a bridge girder and checked both lanes of the roadway; the bridge was clear.

Lulu slumped against the rail like a raven twisted in flight, caught up in barbed wire.

"Come on, don't you have sense enough to get in out of the rain?" She climbed through the cables strung between the beams, ran across the road, through the cables on the other side, and over to the east walkway. He dashed across after her.

They walked hard to keep warm, but Lulu was shivering by the time they reached the end of the bridge.

"Th-these clothes n-needed a wash," he chattered.

"Saved yourself some quarters." Without his shades he looked lost; his wildly puffed hairdo had been beaten down by the rain and it made his head look shrunken. "Do you dye your hair?"

"Of course not," he snapped, straightening his back, picking up the pace. "Who said I did?"

"Your face. Your eyebrows aren't that dark, and your skin's so pale -- "

"Hey, what can I say. No, I do not dye my hair. B-but I don't blame you for being s-suspicious. Everybody's phoney. Everybody l-lies."

"That's not true." They were side by side, walking fast. The sidewalk that took them off the bridge wound hard right, running east through the legislature grounds.

"You really believe that?" he asked.

"Yes."

"So tell me true, how you f-feeling right now, a little blue?"

"I'm fine."

"Not pissed off?"

"No."

"Not right fucking riled?"

"No. I'm fine, I said I was fine, I'm fine."

"Uh huh. Sure. What about those guys," he said, flipping the hair out of his eyes, sneering at the domed pile of legislature, monumentally floodlit, pinnacled with snapping flags. "Your bosses. S'pose you think they always tell the truth? Never fuck us over, never suck swill like the bloated swine they are -- "

"Oh, you are so ignorant!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

In the park on either side of them branch clattered against branch and swaying tree trunks creaked. Rain pattered steadily on the wide walk. "You are completely pig ignorant," she finally let him know, "ignorant, arrogant, stupid, vain, conceited, and shallow."

"Shallow?"

"Yes. Totally." They had reached the small square at the park's centre. Home was not far away; she could see her building. The flaring gas jet that commemorated the centennial guttered with the wind, leaping, creeping, casting shadows abrupt and reeling about them.

"You don't know anything about me."

"I know enough."

He stopped. She kept walking. "Hey!" he shouted. She stopped. "You do not know anything about me! If you think nobody lies and everybody tells the truth, then you have to believe me."

"I'm not listening to you. You told me once never to listen to you, so I listened to you then, and I'm not listening to you any more."

"Just this one time you have to believe when I swear," he was shouting again, "swear by, by....." His hands were raised to the storm, imploring, hesitating, trying to invoke something sacred, then his right arm went rigid, one finger aimed from a fist pointing at the floodlit government dome, "I swear by the future, by all the power in that building, that you don't really know anything about me, just like I promise you, you Bobby Ann Jessup, that some day I," left fist thumping his chest, "I'll be in there, fattest hog at the trough!"

"Bravo! Someday you'll scrub legislature urinals, hurrah!"

"Very funny." He walked up to her and they set off again. "You know what I mean."

"Never in a million years."

"Basking in all that power and glory? You wait and see."

Although the rain had slackened to a drizzle, the wind had come around from the north and was blowing cold. Once out of the shelter of the park the two blocks to her apartment building stretched like miles.

"We're gonna get pneumonia," Lulu whined, "I just fucking know it."

They struggled along the street, trudging past the three neighbouring apartment buildings and the weedy upheaval of the empty lot. She felt safe enough with him to take the short cut up the last half block of hill through the alley shadows and finally gratefully to the boardwalk at the darkened back of the building. She fumbled with her keys a moment and then the door was unlocked. The wind slammed it shut behind them, closing them in dry, calm darkness.

"Wow. Thank fuck."

"Careful, there's stairs down here."

"Yikes! An' I thought my place was bad. Creepy crypt, Bat Bob."

"I complain but nothing gets done." They went down. Her apartment was the one door at the far end of the hall showing a sliver of light beneath it. "The building's half empty and nobody else lives on this floor. The managers don't care." Her keys rattled again and the lock scraped open. They were both soaked, and crowded together on the small throw rug inside the door. Lulu was shivering and dripping. "You look frozen."

"I feel it." He was kneeling, struggling with his knotted laces.

"Leave your shoes on the mat. Don't worry about the wet, just don't get mud on the walls."

"No problem."

She popped into her room and found Lewis a baggy T-shirt and a pair of pink sweat pants. He'd managed to get his shoes off and was standing on the rug, pale, wet and trembling. "I can only stay a m-minute," he tried to tell her. "Long w-walk home."

"Don't be crazy, take the bus," she said, offering him the clothes.

"I h-hate buses."

"Then take one hot shower, two bowls of chicken soup, and call yourself a cab."

It was a one-bedroom apartment and the washroom was immediately on hand to the left. "I'm a cab, I'm a cab," he said, going in, untucking his sopping shirt, "just gotta use your can a minute."

"Towels are under the sink."

Assuming he would be quick about it, she hurried to her bedroom again and changed her sopping cloths for fresh jeans and a dry cotton shirt; as she dashed a mop through the puddles by the door she could hear the water running, and Lulu clunking and banging; mop back to the broom closet, bedroom door shut on the mess, and neat freak the sofa cushions into place. Scoop up socks, popcorn bowl.

All tidied on the domestic front, but the shower kept pounding away.

It didn't matter, she told herself, she didn't mind. The building had a boilerful of hot water, water came with the rent, it wasn't like he was costing her money. Snatches of song filtered through the wall. She put the kettle on the stove to boil and then measured four cups of water into a pot for chicken noodle soup. Two bottles of white wine were in the fridge and she uncorked one and poured herself a healthy slosh. Cold, fragrant, she drank it down. And poured another one, smooth and sweet, to sip waiting for the boiling. Tea kettle whistled first, and she shut the burner off and poured the tea to steep. She drank her wine. In the bathroom the shower water ran on. The soup pot's water boiled and she and the wine got the chicken noodle soup package down out of the cupboard and they took the last trim white foil package out of the little red and white cardboard box. Threw the empty cardboard box away into the garbage can under the sink, and took the foil package over the stove to open it up and empty it out.

But when she got there and was actually standing over the stove, steam rising up from the bubbling clarity of the pot, and held the packet tight to rip it tearing open, she realized how ferociously she was seething.

Here it was, Saturday night, and she was cooking and cleaning after some man. It would have been bad enough, it _had_ been bad enough when the man was her _boyfriend_. Although that was too limited a term for an even more inadequate relationship. But for some it could just as well be total stranger? No way.

Did men think? Could they even think at all? Did they really believe they could just palm each other off on her like that? Or could they only simply assume, grunt and root, mindlessly compelled by mindless instinct. As if she wouldn't notice the difference between one or the other.

She poured the soup into the water and could see the universe explode out of infinite nothing and expand, expand to fill eternity, and in the end contract again to exploding nothing; contract and expand again, over and over, cycling endlessly like stirring the soup. She saw the universe and she saw herself. The stock simmered and the noodles rolled and floated. It made her furious; she didn't want to be angry, but she didn't want to go on filling with unacknowledged hurt, either; she just wanted to make a change in her life.

Eyes bright, Lulu came out from the shower looking like a different person. "Ah, Bob, man, I needed that." Wet shoulder length hair was combed back from a face that positively beamed -- the pink sweatpants seemed to have lent him some colour.

"Soup?" She ladled herself a bowl.

"Yeah."

"Help yourself." And to the wine too, no doubt. "Make yourself at home." She tried to sound sarcastic, but wasn't sure he noticed. She filled her tumbler up and sat down at the kitchen table. She was too friendly, that was her problem.

"Wow, this is great." Lulu found a heavy mug and ladled it full of soup. "Thanks, Bob, I really appreciate it."

"It's the least I can do for walking me home." Veins in his arms and the bones under the skin smoothly turning; a change she wanted, yes, but a change for the better. Lulu Lewis was hardly more than a neo-neanderthal.

"I hung some stuff up," he said, drinking his soup, "on the shower rail, it'll be dry in no time, no sweat, then zoom, I'm out of here." Padding across linoleum on cool articulate feet, ankles elegant; JD had no ankles, legs stumping into square-toed blobs. On the plush living room carpet, squatting crouched at her records, flipping through. Standing up excited like a little boy.

"Uh, do you mind if I hang around until this blows over?" He was looking out the living room window, a ground level view across the moldy spring lawn to the street; she joined him there. "Man, this is ugly." Shrubs rocked wickedly in the wind. "It's snowing!"

"Hail," she corrected him. White stones pelted the turf, bounced on the pavement. They were both leaning on the ledge, looking out. Even without her boots on she was taller than him.

"Yikes!" Above sighing wind and sifting rain, the whisper and clatter of hail, down from the sky and abruptly over, the speckled ground gleaming pearly. "That was great!"

He was jittery with delight.

"Could've killed us. If we'd been out there." His nose was too sharp, too hook-beaked for him to be ever really handsome.

"No way, really?" He had tuned her stereo to an FM rock station and bounced over to the TV; he turned it on and shut off the sound. "You mind?"

"Never." She was at the kitchen counter, emptying the first bottle into her glass. "No mind." He danced around the living room rug; good feet, good rhythm. JD hated dancing. She settled down on the chesterfield. Lulu was at the TV, flipping the knob through the channels.

Cute as a puppy and just as empty headed. Bouncing restless, rubbing his arms like he was cold, wouldn't sit down. He found some kernels in the rug. "Can we make some popcorn?"

"Go ahead." He banged through the cupboards. "Help yourself."

"Where's the, never mind, found it."

"Fry pan's under the stove." Water beaded and rolled down the window. Her glass was empty. Her legs worked perfectly happily to the kitchen and the wine bottle was open and her glass filled softly up.

He shook the pan and the lid rang with popping; wafting sizzle of garlic. "Cayenne and garlic, it's great, you'll love it."

It was. She did. They sat on the couch eating greasy popcorn out of the bowl on Lulu's lap, scrabbling her hand to the hot bottom of the bowl, pressuring; Lulu, "Yikes!" It was funny. She laughed. He watched hockey. She was too blurry to focus on something that meaningless and so far away. Music curled around her, comfortable.

"Could you really, you know," kernels tangy, crunching, stinging her lips, how to put it, "on the bridge, you know." She waved her glass, whoops, "Jumping."

"Huh?"

"Could you?"

"No. What for? I'm too young to die, jumping is dying. I wanna live, man. When you're dead you're dead, that's all there is to it." He wasn't looking at the hockey he was looking at her and that was good. "Why? I mean, you're not...."

"No, don't be crazy." She slapped his leg, grabbing his knee. "Just gotta pee." She leaned on him getting up, his firm muscles lean and sinews strong. He'd been naked and wet and left the bathroom mudless. She liked that. On the way back she filled her glass again and dropped back down on the couch, bouncing popcorn out of the bowl and a little wine on them both. They both laughed.

After hockey he spun the dial, flipping through the channels; commercials, cop action, unintelligible drama spectacularly dressed. She didn't wear enough dresses, that was her problem. The Queen's familiar face went flipping by. "Hey, wait, stop." She loved the Queen.

"This?"

"Back, back one, there, there." There she was, gorgeous in royal blue, god, that was class, knowing how to wear a ridiculous hat like that and not look awkward; usually the Queen choked her up, sentimentally proud and on the verge of tearful, but Lulu leapt up, bowl and popcorn flying.

"Fuckin' Trudeau!" Teeth clenched, snarling, he was waving his angry right finger at the TV. "Fuckin' French son-of-a-bitch!"

"Hey!" The prime minister on the screen was outside with the Queen, in Ottawa with the peace tower behind them; a table, flunkies with heads bent, attentive, scribal. Lulu trampled white puffs of popcorn into the plush, so impotent with rage he was funnier than the Queen's hat.

"Mellow out," she laughed, "they can't see you. Moon them, why don't you."

"Eastern bastards." He rasped the knob rudely through the channels scanning news, news, baseball and stopped.

"Our Majesty the Queen is no eastern bastard!" She got up angry, surprised to be drunken fighting mad; if he lipped off the Queen she was going to smack him.

He opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it. "Sorry, but that Trudeau drives me crazy. And what good's a queen?"

"Ha! You're just scared 'cause she's a woman, and you can't handle it."

"I can handle women, Bob."

"No way."

"Can too."

"I doubt it." He let her have the last word and she let him make more popcorn. Happily all the news and sports and weather on TV ended and the second cheery bottle bubbled empty into her smooth cool glass.

"Check this out, this is hilarious," Lulu said.

Something American was on but she didn't care and wouldn't watch. She felt great.

He watched TV and she watched him. Each time she got up off the couch, to go to the bathroom, the kitchen for a drink of water, or to look out the window, she put her hand on Lulu's leg, each time higher and higher up his thigh, the bright chrome popcorn bowl on his lap hiding more than the thin pink sweats could.

Exciting him was exciting, but why tease when she knew she didn't want him? She wasn't sure where things were headed until sitting down on the couch with a fresh bag of potato chips to snuggle beside him she looked at him and he was looking at her, tense and uncertain. She could see his nervous Adam's apple bob; the cold stark fear in his eyes made her flush with heat.

The code was clear and ramifications of the triangle unmistakable. She was JD's girl, JD wasn't here, Lulu was one of JD's best friends; if she and Lulu betrayed him, then she'd be honour-bound to break up with JD; and of course she couldn't see Lulu again because she'd cheated on his best friend with him. None of them could trust each other ever again. It was perfect, it was right out of high school, and if it worked she'd be rid of both of them.

Freedom; the thought made her wet with desire.

Kneeling on the sofa cushions eye to eye with Lewis she pressed closer. He backed away until the sofa stopped him and she moved closer, her hands gliding from his knees up his thighs, cupping the underside of the popcorn bowl that he clutched to his groin like a fig leaf.

"Now, Bob," he muttered hoarsely.

"Shut up, Lulu." She flung the bowl dully clanging away and moved in, lips gently touching. His eyes closed reflexively as they kissed, mouths greedy, tongues squirming.

One hand felt him erect through the sweats and the other slid fingers tight through the hair on the back of his head, grabbing him, pulling him closer to her, kissing harder. The searching hand explored up under his T-shirt, stroking the hair on his belly, and then lifted the elastic band of the sweats.

She broke away from the kiss. He lay there gasping, eyes tightly closed. She quickly lifted the sweat pants over his lolling erection and yanked them down his legs, over his feet and off.

"Oh, god," he moaned.

Her fingers trembled as she fumbled at her shirt, plaid cotton stripped and flung away; hopping frantically on one leg, then the other, her jeans and panties kicked away; her bra dropped off as she leaped naked on the sofa, grabbing the T-shirt and pushing him by the shoulders down to lie on the couch.

She kissed his throat, his belly, brushing her nipples against him. His fine body hair was auburn, pubes only slightly darker. Hot flesh cupped in her hands, she raked her nails through coarse hair.

"Please, please," he gasped.

Was she already over the threshold? Or did she have to take him inside. She held his blood hot flesh tight, pumped her hand. His legs were rigid, fingers dug in the sofa cushions.

Freedom; a hard-on never looked so good. Strangely not even meat, but like a plant, a flower. She licked him experimentally and almost at once he was spurting, hips thrusting penis in her hand. Salty bitter taste of seed on her lips.

She held him tight and he was still hard, begging, "Oh no, please, oh god."

If he was anything like JD she'd better be quick or the flower would wilt. She moved to straddle him, hands wet, guiding him in. His mouth was open, lips dry, soundless. "Ah, yes." She rocked back, and back, settling down, letting him fill her.

When she made love she was a thirsty bird flying, looking for home in a lush green valley. The more excited she got, the closer she got to the valley. With JD the bird hardly ever found a twig to touch down on. When she masturbated her thirsty bird found the valley and made a nest. She liked being in the light. Lulu was trying to move with her, slippery, thrusting. She liked being on top.

She and Lulu rocked and rolled, panting, squelching, sweating. The thirsty bird flew and found the valley, circling around it, dropping down; greenery flashed past her.

"Aah," Lulu gurgled, back arched, butt and pelvis lifting her impaled. She held tight, clamped down, felt him twitching, throbbing inside her, spurting again. His knees gave out and she rode him down, tried to keep moving, looking for what she wanted; but she had to start the search all over again and before she could get anywhere he was shrinking limp, slipping away from her.

"Bobby Ann, oh, Bobby Ann," he mumbled.

Hugging him, she stroked his brow. "Ah, Lulu." She could read the delight in his eyes, masking the fear and confusion. "Tell me one thing."

"Anything."

"In the bar tonight, were you selling drugs to those people? Is that how you got the money?"

"No; no, Bob, no. I'd never do that."

Good. Now she knew what he sounded like when he was lying. "Do you love me, Lulu?" Toying his forelock into a curl.

"Of course I do, Bob, yes, of course I do."

Same tone of voice. She kissed him quick on the end of the nose. "I'll go get us some towels." She got up off him and walked dripping and content to the bathroom. She was making a change for the better. She would have her life back, she would be free of these stupid men, free as a bird. And that was more exhilarating than any orgasm.

She went back to the living room to find Lulu passed out on the couch. She covered him with a blanket and shut off the lights. As she lay down in her bed and drifted blissfully off to sleep, dreaming of her new-found freedom, the busy little sperms of two different men thrashed and swam their way through the compliantly unentangling vaginal mucus, up through the cervix, into the uterus, to their inevitable rendezvous with the egg.

And when the one solitary sperm penetrated the egg's barrier membrane, which instantly sealed itself impervious to any other conclusion, an inconceivable impossibility was given birth to which neither of the two sleeping people in that apartment would ever have dreamed of.

3.

Waking aching in the cold and dark, rat rustle and crawling itch of lice, quick whiff of filthy wet wool immediately overpowered by a deep and bitter rancid stench -- puke, shit, rotted poisoned earth sweating death -- hitting him so hard he's senseless, blinded, deaf and lost.

But hearing voices. Somehow murmur of distant voices.

Groping urgent -- don't scream, its his own voice ringing inside his head although his tongue is numb and silent, don't panic -- blundering against the stiff canvas flap, he finds the seam and slips past, through, into the tunnel.

Kicking, crawling toward light, he scrambles free from the reinforced tunnel mouth, squirms into the mud-bottomed pit of the trench.

He's breathing, he's terrified, the cold air is moving around him and he can feel the warmth of the sun on his face, but everything's wrong -- is he blind, really? -- he can hear voices but he can't see who's speaking, can't make out what they're saying. His breath hangs frosted on the air before him and he can smell smoke, like real tea and tobacco, but he knows he's a phantom, only so much mist and vapour.

Fear mounting, his hands claw at the mud of the trench wall, booted feet kicking, climbing --

"Jesus, McKracken!" An explosive exhalation of breath as someone grabs him, pulls him roughly down, throws him into the mud.

A round red face under a tin hat is staring down at him, watery blue eyes bloodshot, angry. The same violent voice hissing, "You want a bullet in the head, you ass?"

Overwhelming relief floods him almost to tears. Does he recognize the angry face? Almost, almost; sees the sergeant's stripes, must be a name, can almost say it.

But fists clenched at his throat let go of his collar, dropping him back into the mud, and he's lost again -- the lumping bulk of uniformed body has disappeared. The sergeant is gone and he's alone.

Fragmented, incomplete -- he's near panic now -- the world is empty, a blank waiting to be filled in --

Someone touches him, helps him to his feet, and a voice close by, quiet with concern, is saying, "John Donald, look here. It's Arch. Here; get up, man, c'mon."

Again recognition and relief warm the cold clutch of fear. He hears a voice like broken glass scraped together, "Arch?" and realizes it's his.

"It's me, JD. Archibald."

It's Arch, right beside him, holding him steady. He can see the dirt in the long creases of Arch's thin, pale face, the dark circles like bruises under Arch's puffy eyes.

"Okay, I'm okay." He's shaking, tries to pull himself together. Other uniformed figures move around them as if through a fog. Men cough and curse, pass them by and ignore them.

Arch lets go but neither of them disappear. They sit down together on spent shell casings that keep their butts out of the mud. Arch is making tea in another empty casing, feeding a small, smoky fire with scrounged splinters, bits of tattered scrap. He can see that Arch is glancing sidelong at him, waiting.

He doesn't know what to say. "No problems, Archibald, fit as fancy."

The relief is plain on Arch's face. "For a minute there I thought we lost you, Johnny boy." He looks down to poke about in the steaming brew.

McKracken goes through his pockets, looking for something. What? He can't find it. The fog is lifting. He thinks he knows where they are.

They're on the line.

The front line.

Sky is blue, hardly cloudy. Shouldn't grey skies be pissing down on them? The wind is chill, but at least it's blowing their way, toward Fritz's lines.

JD keeps patting through his pockets.

Arch's jaw is trembling; he looks up at him quick then back at the tea.

"It's okay, Arch, forget it. When I woke up I didn't know where I was for a minute, that's all."

"Lucky you," Arch says. "Snipers are wicked, hereabouts.

Jackson probably saved you a nasty ding."

"Jackson?"

"Our sergeant. Leo Jackson."

"Right. Of course, Archie boy." JD finds a pouch and a pipe. He must have been looking for them. "Let's have a smoke."

Arch's shoulders shake but he doesn't make any noise. He nods, rubs his knuckles into his eyes. Wipes his nose.

McKracken meticulously stuffs the pipe, not wasting a crumb. The world is filling in. He's at the front. The squad is positioned up and down the trench; he sees faces that must be familiar, and learns the names of other bodies called Yopick and Demchuk, new recruits Arch says were assigned at last leave.

He and Arch smoke. They drink their tea. They clean their rifles; when Arch curses, JD does the same.

Sergeant Jackson has them stand guard; he has them dig, and fetch and carry. Spools of wire, boxes of cartridges. They crouch and scamper through the trenches, duck down into tunnels, navigate through underground passages. It's all right. He knows where he is. He knows what he's doing. Whenever they come up he can see the sky. It's blue. It's morning. He can handle it.

At noon they go to chow line and he gets separated from Arch but does not panic. He gets his chow, he eats it; he goes to the latrine, he salutes when the others do. He's stopped shaking and his belly no longer is a knot of mindless terror. He's getting used to the sound of his own voice. By mid-afternoon he's found his way back to his company's stretch of front line trench. It's quiet. Jackson is gone somewhere, and left them with nothing to do. It's warm enough in the sun that he can take his coat off and pick lice out, crushing them between his nails before flicking them away. He rummages through his pockets; he drinks tea with Arch and they share another smoke. He stares up at the blue heavens.

As if for his amusement, a lone biplane drifts lazily across the sky -- one of ours, or one of theirs? Has it come from the east or the west? Another appears, graceful as a dragonfly. A foe, or a mate? They begin to roll and twist. Engines barely audible, another plane appears, dips and sways into the dance. They are joined by another pair, and finally three more biplanes approach from the west. These last are low enough so that he can see the tri-colour cockades on their underwings -- definitely ours -- hip, hip, huzzah, from the lads in the trenches. The craft weave and spin, rising and bobbing and falling, as if they're making something graceful and precise, a picture or a tapestry. It's delightful. The tiny snarl of distant angry engines, the staccato yammering of the guns, seems totally at ease. He's smiling, trying to hum the dogfight's tune; their dance is so beautiful; he sways gracefully across a glistening ballroom.

Smoke trails cloud the blue. He is watching the slow spin and plummet of flaming debris trailing earthward when the ground heaves thunder under his feet and he is pitched and tossed with so many clods of spattering dirt. He tumbles, is up on his feet and running, gets nowhere. He doesn't understand what is happening. The air is thick with choking smoke. He's back in the trench, or what used to be the trench. Dazed, standing at the edge of the crater, he can see the bloody water seeping, welling up, rising.

The shells keep falling, pounding and roaring.

Yopick is with him on his side of the crater, a little further back from the edge. The man is paralysed with fear, his face white with shock. He's glad he can't see his own face. The barrage sweeps up and down the line, hitting and missing. Men are screaming, hollering, dying, littering the wracked mudscape with smoking bloody bits; machine guns are firing wantonly. Steady, he's telling Yopick, working one of the man's arms loose from the fetal curl, prying him to his feet, steady up; he can hear nothing but the colossal thunder. Where will lightning strike next? What good is being in a bunker? Sections of trench are buried one instant, blasted savagely clear the next. But they're too exposed here to sniper fire. He half leads, half totes Yopick into the sheltering trench. The man seems to be coming to himself. He babbles an endless string of Ukrainian in McKracken's ear. "Sure, Billy," he keeps telling the man, "whatever you say." At least he can hear again. At least he's not deaf.

A hundred feet past the blasted end of the trench they find Arch and Jackson and the rest of the squad. They're brewing tea, having a smoke. The dead are stacked like cordwood. The barrage has moved off as suddenly as it came.

When the sergeant sees him he whistles appreciatively and shakes his head. "McKracken, if you could see yourself now."

"Shit, holy shit." Arch is in awe, walking up slowly to him, peering in his face; reaches out, grabs hold of his tin pot, lifts it off his head. He can feel the warmth now, trickling through his matted, dirty hair, the numbness giving way to a stinging burning. The top of his helmet is sliced and jagged as if someone has hacked it with a can opener and peeled the top back.

"He looks like one of them bleeding monks, like Friar Tuckin' Fuck himself," Summerfield says. They laugh. Yopick's eyes are less glazed and the colour is coming back into his face; he looks at them as if they're all crazy.

The wind rises cold and bitter as the sun sets. They find a medic to dress his scalp. There are plenty of spare tin hats. Jackson has them digging and filling sandbags. The expected German assault does not come, yet they stay put. Supper is sent up from the chow lines, freezing in the buckets by the time it gets to them. Once it's dark rain begins to fall, a steady soaking drizzle. The word is passed up to them from Command; they're going to have a go at the other side.

The drizzle turns to sleet. McKracken's stiff fingers are cramped around his rifle, its chamber empty and bayonet fixed in place. He is crusted with dirty, stinking mud. He is not alone but the men on either side of him have faded past grey to become vague restless shades, moving as he does, stamping their feet to keep the circulation. Shells scream overhead but now they're glad to hear them; their artillery is giving Jerry a pounding. Come daylight, no-man's-land will again be molded into a new set of deadly features; the wire that is being cut will be re-strung. The snipers will creep and crawl and play their lethal games.

A continued string of artillery marker flares begins to burst and float, green and yellow over the other lines. They lend a festive air as the men gulp their triple and quadruple rum rations. "Plenty to go around boys, drink up, drink up," Jackson tells them. "Nothing to it; Fritz is going to lay down and roll over."

When the guns stop the sudden silence of the night is waiting to be filled with them. The first whistle shrills and the signal is caught up by others along the line.

They're going over the top.

The men rise out of the ground, their voices sounding in chorus. McKracken is shouting with them, climbing the steps hacked out of the mud, up out of the trench, marching with them, streaming through the breaks in the wire as the battalion pours out into no-man's-land.

It's all right, he tells himself, he knows what he's doing. The day is gone. The rum has warmed him. Fear will wait. He advances through the muck with his mates all around him.

Archibald, he remembers. Where's Arch?

Artillery flares pop and flicker, casting grotesque green shadows, then Very lights burst, hang white in the sky.

Men fall screaming and are left behind. What's happening to them? Machine gun fire spatters mud at their feet. He can't recognize anyone, he's lost. An enemy barrage thunders; shells fall shrieking around them, craters exploding, spewing debris.

Somehow they hear the frantic command, the order to load. Not pausing, trotting forward, the men around him slam the cartridges home, start shooting. Was there an order to fire? He can't work the bolt, get even the first bullet in. The pack straps cut his shoulders; his hands are shaking. He doesn't know what to do, and fear is the beast that swallows him up.

More flares burst, illuminating starkly; they are running, hollering, across the field, around deep, steaming craters, past more fallen men in grey uniforms, half-trampled into the oozing mud. Past obliterated bunkers and devastated trenches.

He is terrified. What is he supposed to do when he gets there?

He is alone, running.

Great looping coils of wire are everywhere, a maze of entanglement. Where is he supposed to go?

He can do this by himself, he has to.

And only when he is trapped, bogged to the knees in mud with arms flung crucifixion wide, ensnarled in the razor-sharp wire, does he see, stark white in the flare light, men, countlessly around him, mere bodies such as his, wracked and strung, sacrificed; and only then does JD McKracken realize, as he cries out under the awesome shuddering surprise of machine gun bullets spattering hot as blood in his throat, that even more terrifying than pain, or suffering, is the gyring maelstrom of black and white that in howling silence comes to claim him.

4.

The first telegram for Doodle McKracken, dead father of the missing JD, arrived as Doodle was lifting his glass to toast the New Year, and the new decade, for the staff of the island complex.

This would be their decade of prosperity, Doodle was telling them, dusting off the pompous oratory that had been stock for him since the 30s, the 90s would be their golden gateway to the future; J'loo shuffled to the head of the assembly, crouching and bobbing obsequiously, and handed him the slip of flimsy pink paper.

He glanced at it. A Mc-anybody was none of the permanent tans he had working there, nor did it match up with the guest list that existed nowhere on paper but which was seared indelibly as a brand on his memory. He stuffed the telegram in his pocket, gulped down his shot, and sent the staff back to work.

And it couldn't be for him.

After all, he was Paul Seyton now. That was the name on his international driver's licence, and it was the name officially stamped on his bogus American passport. It was the name that had evolved out of a long string of flim-flams and aliases, and much more importantly, it was how the clients knew him.

The clients did not like hassles. And their manager being haunted by an obscure past life would definitely have qualified as a hassle.

Some of them might even complain to the owners.

He had never met the owners, and didn't particulary want to.

Only later that New Year's Day, as he was basking on the beach, enjoying a backrub, did Paul Seyton experience the first disquieting suspicions, like the tiny tremors he could feel vibrating through the ground, precursors of the big shock waves to come.

What was the name on that message, was it McKneely? Not McDonald. Couldn't have been McKracken, McKracken was dead and gone, had been for more than thirty years.

When he went back to the office he rooted through the garbage, but he couldn't find it. The pink slip of almost tissue thin paper should've been there, nonchalantly crumpled, somewhere in the basket with all the other unemptied scraps.

But it wasn't.

He unlocked the liquor cabinet and had a shot, and thought about it. It was a coincidence. Or a mistake. Had to be.

The second telegram came the day the first of the monster quakes ravaged the big island to the north of them, pounding it with killer tsunamis.

J'loo delivered the telegram for McKracken to the manager's office in the morning, and he happened to be there and accepted it himself before the receptionist could get her hands on it. Then he locked himself in his inner sanctum, sat down at the big mahogany desk, and he read it, slowly, devouring it letter by letter, word by word, line by line, before he burned it in his ashtray, powdered the wisps of ash, and rinsed the powder down the drain of the kitchen sink in his adjoining suite.

It didn't make any sense. The telegram was from a law firm whose name he didn't recognize, in Edmonton, Canada, a place he didn't want to remember. It seemed to be an invitation to a funeral, which was to be held on the coming Easter Friday. Good Friday. If he'd been superstitious, he might've been scared.

At least, he didn't think he was superstitious.

But later that afternoon, when the chandeliers in the dining room jittered and swayed, and the frantic reports of death and disaster flooded the airwaves, he wasn't so sure.

Who knew he was here? How did those Jew lawyers get this address? Just a computer glitch, he thought, trying to console himself, part of a mass mailing; but he didn't believe that for a second.

And whose funeral was it? Would it be, he corrected himself; Easter was six weeks away. Who planned funerals that far in advance?

People like his clients did. He went to the liquor cabinet and had a couple of stiff belts. People like the owners.

Two days later he found the first note of many, pencil printed in neat block letters on a small square of yellow paper that had been folded over once to make a smaller rectangle, that was then surreptitiously tucked into the breast pocket of one of his neatly ironed shirts hanging in his closet, and the fragrant breezes of Paul Seyton's island paradise blew sulphurously suspicious.

He knew what a conspiracy smelled like, and this one reeked.

Leave, the notes told him, go, go while you still have a chance; go back, go home.

Go back where? He had no home. Did they want him to go to Hong Kong? Queensland? Bali, maybe?

They -- whoever 'they' were -- could eat shit and die. He'd just turned seventy-three, way too old for this crap, he didn't have time to waste, and he was too smart to fall for it. No gang of spooks was going to fuck up his retirement.

He baited traps, and skulked and spied, but he caught no one, proved nothing, and suspected everybody. Mass firings and re-hirings didn't help. The unstoppable yellow notes kept turning up in his clothing, insidious as vermin.

Obsessed with fiddling quotidian minutiae, Seyton lost sight of the big picture. He didn't see the end coming until the third telegram arrived, and there wasn't anything else he could do about it.

The sun was a shimmering red ball, blazing huge, about to fall out of the sky and sink sizzling into the western ocean; the Pacific wide and high as the zenith burned blood red with the haze of wind-borne smoke and ash. To the north, the big island lay hidden by a smudge of billowing darkness that flecked almost through with hints of gold and fire, hidden eruptions flaring and lava running molten to the sea. Scuttling crab-naked along the beach, alert to the smallest of tremors, he snooped into deadfalls where palms at shoreline lay toppled by the big quakes.

Thick with garbage and ash, waves lolled and slopped, bobbing coconuts. Shadow pocked dark with debris, the sunset sands gleamed wetly metallic -- oil slick shades of aquamarine, brazen hints of cobalt and copper. He hopped and ran with the shore birds, wetting his feet, kicking through chunks of foam and scraps of rag littering the beach. A twilight burst of bats swooped low over him, circled out to sea, wound up high and headed back inland.

Inland, where any creature of sense was bound; beyond rising ranges of hurricane-bald hilltops to the highlands, and the relative safety of some sheltering fold. How their little island had escaped the tsunamis he hadn't a clue.

The waterline wriggled and shone against the darkening shore. He found his things on the beach where he'd left them, seemingly undisturbed, apparently unmolested. He lifted his towel with a stick, crouching poised like he feared vipers hidden and coiled to strike. There was nothing there. With a flick of his wrist he flipped the towel up, caught it as it fell, and shook it snapping out. Still nothing.

What did he expect, a blizzard of daffodils?

Towelling off, he prodded his beach shorts; picked them up with the stick; flipped them, caught them, shook the sand out. He tossed the stick away. After all six pockets were each one turned inside out empty and tucked back in again, he gave his beach shorts a final shake and put them on.

He jogged back to the compound, past the row of empty A-frame cabins lately abandoned and already growing over with creepers and vines. Through the dusk, up the beach from the sea the flat-roofed main building hove into sight. Wired high in the palms, the lights that flooded the grounds were just coming on, defining the rectangle of steel poles and gleaming razor wire, isolating the compound in a flickering fluorescent haze. He went in the open double doors of the front entrance, his feet leaving damp prints on the cracked slabs of concrete. Cane toads hopped fast and fat through the lobby. Pungent aromas of hot oil and spice wafted from the kitchen. Soon the clients would wake.

He lifted the counter gate and strode through reception toward his office.

Velsi's chair sat empty at the switchboard.

"Velsi!" Where was the girl? "Velsi?"

He went through the flickering fluorescent light of his cramped office into the cool spacious shadows of his suite. In the bedroom he picked slacks and a short sleeved shirt, chose a tie for the evening. He went through the pockets of his mud crusted cotton trousers, transferring his wallet, his key ring. He tucked the wallet into his back left hip pocket, but as he settled his keys away into the front right something rustled against his fumbling fingertips.

His heart jumped -- he should've checked! -- and he fished the folded piece of yellow paper out.

He should throw it straight into the trash, go out into the compound, grab some black bastard and whip his ass. Choking down his fury, grinding his teeth, his gnarled fingers fiddled and twisted and the note was open.

Square caps in the middle of the square of paper, two words: GO BACK.

"Fucking niggers!" He shredded the paper to minuscule yellow scraps and let them fall flutteringly into the waste basket. "Never. Fucking, never!"

Through the partially closed venetians he could see the row of clearings that had been bulldozed square out of the wild tangle. Slabs of fresh concrete ghosted pale, each dark-specked with its entrance hatch. The clients' bunkers, where they slept the days away. N-bomb, H-bomb, A-bomb proof -- earthquake impervious. Hermetically sealed against any viral doom, any contaminating disaster. He knotted his tie, brushed his kinked and wiry white hair. It was getting dark. He checked his watch. They'd be coming out soon, just like vampire bats, into the night to feed.

He'd have the boys set out chairs and a few small tables for drinks on the lawn near the beach -- he'd bring out the telescope -- the clients liked to watch. It charmed them to see refugees fleeing from what was left of the big island, steering small skiffs through the lavishly shark-infested waters beyond the jagged reefs, struggling to come safely to shore. He was just thinking that last night the wind had shifted and they'd been able to see plumes of lava jetting into the northern sky, spectacular firebursts of new eruptions -- when he heard J'loo coming from the village, excitedly calling, "Seyton, Mister Seyton!"

"Carl!" he shouted, calling his houseboy, looking in the mirror, snugging the tie knot at his throat, "see what he wants." J'loo wasn't following the road to the main gate, but shortcutting through the gully out back, making straight for his kitchen window. "Damn you, Carl -- "

"Please, Mister Seyton!" J'loo was pounding on the wall outside.

"Wait a minute, dammit." He went into the kitchen and flipped on the switch. The fluorescent tubes crackled and flickered, and the radio on the counter blared alive, static voices bursting and hissing, broken through the airwaves.

J'loo was pressed to the mesh, mashing his face against the screen. "Another one, another one has come, Mister

Seyton!" In the palm of one hand a piece of pink paper held against the mesh. "Wires, they're down," J'loo babbled in a rush, "no power, no lights, Ginor bundling Alup up, we go inland -- how can, and almost out the door -- "

"Back off," Seyton snarled. "Get off the screen already, you'll bust the damn thing." He was prying at the bottom tabs, lifting at the top; the screen scraped, moved, and he jiggled it loose, swung it aside. J'loo thrust his arm through, handing over the paper damp with sweat, backing away from the rectangle of light pouring out the kitchen window. Moths were already bumping and fluttering their way through.

The third telegram.

Even as he read the bold black telegraphic heading, the jumble of wisp-slight type impossibly clattered out by a dead machine, he was feeling it gather in the distance, a trembling susurrus murmur of voices low beyond hearing, like the first sub-sonic waves of a tsunami's shock.

Like the second telegram, this one invited him to the impending Good Friday's funeral, 8 a.m. Mountain Standard Time, at the Crumby Valley Cemetery, near Jackpine, Alberta. But unlike the second, this one was not addressed to some antiseptic initials, to any JD. This one was personal. This one was for him. Doodle, it said. To Doodle McKracken.

"Vera," he cursed, like spitting poison. "You fucking bitch!"

"Mister Seyton?"

"Go home, J'loo. Pack your family up, and run like hell. This one's going to be a ballbuster."

Doodle. God, how he loathed that name. It had to be Vera.

He burned the telegram in the sink. He was hearing the gathering rush, like a typhoon wave swelled deep and rising, surging powerful, unstoppable. His hands were shaking and his shirt was damp with sweat. He yanked at the tie knot, pulled it off, stripped the shirt and flung it down; went to the bathroom, towelled off, put on cologne again -- the clients would be out any second -- went to his bedroom and got a fresh shirt from the closet. Put it on, did it up, tucked it in.

Vera. He'd only be married once; now he remembered why.

He put the tie around his neck, knotted it, was snugging it up when his forearm brushed his chest, the breast pocket, and he felt it.

Took out the yellow slip folded and stuck in the breast pocket of a shirt the dark women in the blue dresses had laundered so neatly and which he had checked so thoroughly before putting it away in his closet, just so he could catch whoever was trying to fuck his mind.

He opened this one defiantly, expecting to read those same two words, 'go back.' And almost loosing control of his bowels, almost whimpering, at the sight of the three damning words.

GO HOME MCKRACKEN

The dark ink might as well have been blood, the paper torn and balled and chewed and swallowed might as well have been a pig's head nailed to his door, because he was hearing it now, the conspiracy rumbling tidal wave deep and loud, all around him, coming closer, shrill above the whistling of wind venting as the clients processed through their airlocks.

Through his bedroom window he could see the gusts of vapour spouting faint, some of the hatch cover locks beginning to spin.

They were all around him. Someone here knew who he was. That meant bad, bad trouble.

The clients wouldn't like that. Not at all. They would never understand. His ass was grass.

He ran around his suite, frantic, what to do? what to do? There was no time. A cloud of bugs flapped in through the open screen. Who was it? Who were they? J'loo was gone, down the steep gully's slope to where his bicycle lay against the guava bushes.

He was hearing it all around him, storm loud, hurricane proud, the advent of a horrific babelogue, a tumult of voices reciting his crimes, a cacophony of lifelong evil. It had him gathered and rising, his heart pounding and his mouth dry, to rise cresting with the wave.

Raindrops were falling, spattering thickly. Lightning crackled and split the purple cloud roiling sky as booming thunder shook the windowpanes.

No time, no time, but still he made it to his office and didn't fumble spinning the tumblers -- if only he had time to get a bottle out and chug-a-lug hard -- but the safe was open, the pistol waiting there atop the small, heavy velvet bag almost like he'd planned it. Scooped up and out of his office, trying not to run. Good thing for Velsi she wasn't hanging around to delay him with questions or witnessing.

He was out of the building, and out of the compound, beyond the fence, escaping from the quadrangle of light into the black and tropical night, running toward the dawn as the western seas began to heave and rise, and when the storm waves thundered crashing ashore with more than hurricane force, Doodle McKracken was more than long gone, returning despite all the oaths he'd sworn to a past he'd long ago thought was dead and buried.

5.

Water is precious, packed at risk of death; McKracken dreams Arch is making tea. They are cold winter mud, and fire burns smoke they gratefully breathe.

Arch has his pictures out, mam and pap, more ragged round the edges and dirty. His girl.

Both are thinking, will she wait? Some questions you never ask. In Paris Arch got the dose; he himself was too scared to try.

Arch stirs the pictures in.

Fire goes out and water is hot, blue sky unnaturally blessed, scraps steeping.

He lights the pipe and Arch squats beside him. They share. They drink.

Gay Paree, Arch says.

McKracken grimaces, lips dry, splitting.

Grinning, Arch digs mud, handfuls of bone, hunks of clotted flesh; eats them.

Picadilly Circus, he says. They both laugh.

The wind says he is sleeping. The big guns will roar. Ordered, he must obey; whistle called, he is immobile, shrieking.

On his back in the dark his hands claw upward through sleep splinter sharp, earth rot reeking, free to black emptiness all encompassing and inescapable, from which he is born anew.

"Jesus, McKracken! You want a bullet in the head, you silly ass!"

He'd scrambled from the hole, been almost up out of the trench before Jackson pulls him back to reality and throws him in the mud; stands over him glaring, round red face under an angry tin hat, then walks away.

"JD; here, get up; come on." Arch helps him to his feet.

"Okay, I'm okay." He's lying, but at least he knows it. "Fit as a fiddle, Archibald, not to worry." He'd been dreaming he doesn't want to think what.

Arch makes tea; he can't drink his. They smoke and stand around for awhile, then Jackson has them fetch and carry all the rest of the morning.

After noon chow he is watching an aerial ballet, engines whining and Fokkers spinning smoking earthward when the mud beneath his feet pitches heaving. The blast bowls him over.

He hears ringing in his ears; daft, he thinks he's deafened, but even the deaf would surely have to hear the barrage that thunders smoke and fire up and down the line.

Finding Billy Yopick babbling by a crater, he comes to his senses enough to know that if he can hear Galacian yammering, he's all right.

Machine gun fire whines closer, seeking them out. He leads Yopick back to sheltering trench. The barrage stops as wantonly as it started. They find the boys piling the newly dead.

Jackson whistles and shakes his head. "JD, if you could only see yourself."

"Lucky, Lord lucky," says Arch, awed, walking slowly up to him, peering. When Arch reaches and lifts his tin pot off he can feel the bloody warmth.

Summerfield laughs. "Tonsured good, our monk is, just like Tuckin' Friar Fuck himself."

Helmet ripped by shrapnel, his wound is only a scratch and they all have a good laugh. He finds a new tin hat by suppertime; they eat frozen slop and wait. Darkness falls, then rain, then sleet. They ready themselves; waiting, at last their artillery begins to pound the enemy. Flares light the night like a party.

Jackson makes his rounds. "Plenty to go around boys, drink up, drink up. Nothing to it; Fritz is going to lay down and roll over."

Their officers are in place when the shelling stops. Whistles shrill one after another and the men rise up shouting.

He marches with them through the gaps in the wire out to no-man's-land.

They run. They have a job to do. Fallen men are left behind. No stopping; the officers will shoot you. Through the muck, around craters, past more fallen; they are firing. He slams cartridge after cartridge home, shooting.

At the breach in the enemy wire he balks, panicking, knowing he's been there before, knowing what waits for him; he can't go on.

Men charge past all around, firing, falling. The air is alive with sizzling lead. He is frozen, a target. If Jerry doesn't get him his own commanders will.

The earth spouts blood and thunder and he will be consumed, but from somewhere Arch is there, stark white in the flarelight, pounding him on the back, screaming, "Go, Johnny, go!" And he is up, shrieking his fear raw, sharp as the bayonet point that leads him headlong to enemy trenches.

It is dark. He is alone, can't see anyone near.

Around him in the night is battle. Crouched, immobile, he waits.

Whistles signal the withdrawal.

He scrambles up out of the trench and begins trotting back; through the wire; out into no-man's-land.

Everything feels wrong.

He hears the cry, "Gas!"

He stops, drops his rifle, reaches for the mask at his belt.

It isn't there.

He tries to hold his breath and run; it's beyond his control, exhalation bursting and despair of breathing in; but the air is still good. Terrified, he doesn't know where he is; then thinks he does, and runs again.

The ground disappears beneath his feet and he falls into the shell crater, sliding, slipping down into the ooze. He can feel the dead in its murky bottom calling him. He claws frantically but there is nothing to hold on to. His own weight is dragging him down. The pool is a fetid soup of old blood and decay, the stench fearful.

He doesn't know he is gasping, screaming, until he gulps the first lungful of searing agony that has crept vaporously across the battlefield to roll over the brim of the crater, settling low, pouring down on him. Then he has no more tongue for anything. His eyes are burning out of his head. Writhing, he slips the last few inches down, feet, legs, chest sinking in the pool, and as his head goes under, McKracken knows.

6.

The connecting flight from Vancouver arrived at the Edmonton International Airport in the dead of night.

Of course Paul Seyton had never been there before, but then neither had Doodle McKracken. Doodle had left the country rattling south in a freezing pick-up, swearing, as a blizzard blew him across the border into Montana, flat broke and California bound, that he'd put her and that belly behind him for good.

Well, he reflected, waiting for his baggage to come round, staring out the terminal window at the moonlit night, here he was, returned from the world of living colour to the land of black and white; cramped and crotchety after the flight, only back in the country for less than 24 hours but already sick to death of hearing the whining about Meech Lake and national unity, or the lack of it. It was time to break the damn country up and sell it off piece-meal to the highest bidder; or give it all back to the bush niggers and be done with it.

He wandered through the terminal, suspicious among the kiosks. With sections walled off by sheets of plywood and floor tiles ripped up to show concrete and wiring, the place looked half-finished. Innocent renovations? Or a false front hastily cobbled together, something to deceive him, conspired into existence even as his flight was touching down. Haggard passengers and flat security guards, hyper flight crews; were all these people actors, each part of something more, something larger? Something sinister.

He couldn't trust anyone.

As Paul Seyton's traveller's cheques backed by a major gold card rented him a big shiny new Detroit automobile, Doodle McKracken scrutinized the face of the woman behind the counter, reading any smirk, any look in her eye that would tell him that yes, she knew, she was in on the sham, that it was all a plot.

Nervously leafing through the papers, he signed the rental agreement, took the keys, collected his suitcase and walked away from the airport. Taxi cabs cruised by, slowed suspiciously, then sped off. Other stragglers dispersing seemed to have their own destinations, destinies separate from his. But he couldn't be sure. He would never be sure, not until he hunted Vera down and got this thing settled.

Within an hour of arrival he was rolling down the sleek blacktop, scouting the map on his lap for the turn-offs he needed to take him east and north, to Jackpine.

Whose funeral was it anyway? Christ was dead, the voices on the radio said, preaching on the dial between empty crackle and hiss and the tinny blare of pop music. It wasn't Vera's, was it? But whose? It was early Thursday morning, but the radio preachers already had sweet Jesus nailed to the cross; hallelujah, they shouted as he sped through the night, the suffering Lamb would rise again to redeem all mankind, praise be. If Vera wanted him at the Crumby Valley Cemetery at eight the next morning, then the last thing he was going to do was rush there like a fool. A trap? Of course. Maybe this funeral was supposed to be his.

Well let her try. The pistol made a comfortable weight in the pocket of his suitcoat. Plastic, virtually undetectable, smuggling it in had been child's play. If this asswipe country was ripe for civil war maybe he'd emigrate, open an import business.

Crumby Valley wasn't on the map but that wouldn't be a problem. It was breakfast time when he cruised into Jackpine and checked into the one of the motels along the highway business strip. A couple of hours later, after a few pennies spent treating in the local coffee shop, he knew everything he could possibly want to know without being obvious enough to have made anyone suspicious. Rural Alberta was full of people sticking their noses into other folks' business.

He went back to his motel room, strangely fatigued, needing a nap to clear his head before planning strategy. His joints were aching, playing hell with him; it must be the weather. It seemed bitterly cold, no matter how many more layers of clothes he put on.

Maybe it was the altitude, or the dry air. He slept poorly, plagued by drifting visions; haunting fragments of dreams, like a past that never could have been; flashes of summer sunlight and a small boy crying; some innocent gesture turned bloody and painful, a softball thrown by a father too hard, a playful fist accidently connecting; but a hand-rung school bell clanged echoing and the childhood he woke up remembering must have been his own Ontario boyhood.

Must have been.

Vera was burying their son tomorrow, a boy he'd never known.

After his shower, dressing to go out, he couldn't help but feel like he was coming down with something; his throat was scratchy, like a cold coming on, and he felt generally listless. The sooner he was done and out of here, back to some warm spot in the tropical sun, the better.

He went for a drive in the country.

A small town funeral was an intimate affair; he'd stick out like a sore thumb, an obvious stranger.

He needed an alias, a disguise, some camouflage so he could blend in. But he was a little too old to tie a bush to his head and hide in the ditch.

He puttered along the gravel roads up and down through the hill country east of Jackpine. The landscape had changed. There weren't as many trees as he remembered, and the soil seemed bony, sparse and poor. Were all the farms deserted? Didn't anybody live here anymore?

He stopped when he saw people outside working; had a brief chat before moseying along. He'd never thought of himself as old before, he was still a powerful man, vigorous, in his prime; but he could tell that's how the farmers and ranchers saw him, some old timer, probably back from Phoenix or Vegas, checking up on the way things used to be, comparing them to the way they were now. They treated him to coffee and told him everything he needed to know.

By late afternoon he found the farm of the man so poor he had to be the gravedigger.

Here, for the first time that day, he encountered some genuine suspicion and outright ill-will. But bill after bill greased the man's thick-skinned palm, until Doodle McKracken had his alibi arranged.

It was a sorrowful Dickensian tale he spun the gravedigger, about being so long lost and lonely, and now wanting to make amends; it was to be a happy ending, with joy and treasure, more than enough to go round, but a shy ending. Which is why the next morning at the young lad's funeral, he, the kind stranger who was no stranger at all, must wear the gravedigger's coat and cap, and sit in the warm cab of the gravedigger's backhoe idling in a discreet corner of the boneyard, that he might witness and grieve, and later at the lunch in the church hall he would shower his kin with gifts, and praise, and rejoicing. When the tidy pile of pictures of the Queen and various past prime ministers reached critical mass in the gravedigger's hand, Doodle knew he'd purchased his disguise.

He had a headache when he got back to town, something that almost never troubled him. He had supper delivered to his room, but somewhere along the line he'd lost his appetite. He watched satellite TV until he fell asleep in the chair, but when he crawled into bed he couldn't get comfortable. He tossed and turned all night, and had to get up and go to the bathroom so many times he lost count. He felt like he was falling apart. Must be the jet lag.

But when his wake-up call came he jumped right out of bed, ready to go. He didn't feel tired; he didn't feel anything. He went out to his car.

To the northeast, false dawn's gradual arc rising above the horizon had lightened out of purple into pink. He drove the paved secondary, and then onto the gravel. He wasn't hungry, didn't need any breakfast. Darkness dissolved slowly into fading grey as trees and fields resumed their daytime shapes. A mile and a half from Crumby he turned off the washboarded gravel road and found the dirt trail he needed to take, briefly south, then up a cut out of the valley to a bald nub of a hilltop.

The hilltop was round but the plot was post-cornered right and wired square. The gate was open and he drove in, slow and cautious over the icy crusts and the frosted turf, to where the backhoe sat in the corner by its barrel of fuel. He pulled up and parked by the gravedigger's truck.

He traded cash for his costume, and then swapped keys with the gravedigger, who drove the rental away. Doodle squirmed into the orange and black checked wool coat, scratchy and musty, and put on the nylon baseball cap with a farm implement surrounded by gold embroidered laurels on its crest, before trading his shoes for the muddy rubber boots. He had seen the grave as he drove by, the fresh mound unmistakable, and beside it the hole's black maw, empty, waiting. He had his motivation, his gravedigger's camouflage. He was on the inside now. All he too had to do, like the hole, was wait. He tried out the operator's seat in the backhoe, but it was too uncomfortable and the cab was too cold. He sat in the pick-up and kept it running with all the heaters blaring full.

The closer sunrise came, the colder out it was. He had to wander around, stretch his legs. Diesel tang hung crisp in the air and the backhoe's engine rumbled steadily. The hilltop was scattered with a bare confusion of old slabs and crosses, their stone soft and faded. Ancient history. They held no interest for him. He stood by the mound of clods, looking in at the rough box, nudging ice chunks, dirt lumps over the edge. He stamped his feet and beat his arms but couldn't seem to warm up. He went and stood in the blast of waste heat blowing off the backhoe's rad, but when the engine cooled the fan stopped and the heat no longer gusted around him. Which at any rate had not been blowing on his feet, where it would've done him some good. It was like he was frozen stiff up past the ankles, sore to the knees. Good thing he wouldn't be doing any kneeling and praying.

When the sun finally rose blinding bright above the morning clouds he wasn't worrying about his cold feet.

Northwest, where the secondary blacktop to Jackpine left its straight run across the sandy cattle dotted plains and threaded the V notched in the far hillside, dropping, narrowing, to wind its way through the valley, he saw the warning flash and glitter.

A shimmering black mass dropped like a slug, rolling down into the valley. The hearse. And behind some vehicles following, a motorcade gleaming white. Two, three other cars. Ominously big. Rented limos?

The hearse slowed for the turn-off.

Suddenly he was afraid, like having stage fright, or that moment of anxious panic before swinging a big deal. He wished they would drive on by; go, keep going, snake wind the rutted washboards up and down jackpined sand dunes, around green hidden lakes, through tamarack swap and birch tree desert thirty more Indian-infested Metis-haunted miles to heathenmost Saskatchewan and then further on and on until parched wide prairie sucked the gas tanks dry and awesome sky too arched and radiant above echoed to silence the roaring of their cryptic engines.

The hearse turned off onto the gravel and quickly picked up speed to make the graveyard hill. The three stretch limos were right behind it. He'd wanted to check this out from the backhoe, in the operator's seat, but he couldn't move, couldn't take a step, and then the hearse was right there, bouncing into the yard, wheeling around, backing up to the hole. He stood stupidly by the mound of grave dirt, wishing he had a prop in his hands, a shovel to lean on.

The three white limos stormed through the gate in attack formation and parked, doors already swinging open, and trapped the hearse up against the hole. He hardly had time to see the rugged short-haired men in sunglasses wearing suits with suspicious armpit bulges start piling out of the limos before two scruffy men in blue polyester jumped out of the hearse and rushed with what he thought was indecent haste to its back doors.

The men from the limos fanned out, securing the perimeter. Doodle'd smelled that smell before, like a conspiracy of ozone and ether, and it screamed _hired guns_. And that meant wealth and power. He'd expected some battered sedans, a few pickups; farmers and storekeepers, humble rural folk.

Before the funeral party even started getting out, the two seedy morticians flung open the hearse doors, yanked the coffin out on its roller bed, picked it up with evident ease, and manhandled it toward the hole. The preacher was just climbing out of the back seat of the hearse as the morticians unceremoniously dumped the coffin into the hole. It echoed with a hollow thud, like garbage into an empty bin.

His heart was pounding. Where was Vera? The pistol in his pocket weighed a ton. He kept his hands in plain sight. The first and last of the big white cars seemed to have nothing but bodyguards and flunkies in them, but two children had bounced giggling and shrieking out of the back seat of the middle limo. Boy and girl, about the same size. Then leading another younger child by the hand, a woman in black got out. It wasn't Vera.

Out of the back door the car's driver had been holding open emerged a young man in a sharp suit, talking on a cell phone. At least Doodle thought he was a young, with sharp beaked nose and crow black hair, but who knew what plastic surgeons knew. This, Doodle could tell, was the man in charge.

"Here."

"Hah?" Doodle almost jumped out of his skin. One of the morticians had snuck up beside him, was handing him the end of a dirty roll of plastic green turf. They unrolled it flapping in the breeze and covered the mound of grave dirt, weighing the corners down with rocks. When they were done Doodle was short of breath. His knees ached and burned, and his legs felt like stumps of ice. His chest hurt. He wanted to go away and sit down.

The preacher had been standing by the hole, with his eyes closed and his chin resting on his chest, but he looked up and raised his hands with the book held high and began, "Dear friends, let us bow our heads in prayer."

Doodle was trapped. He swiped off his cap, the wind cold on his perspiring scalp, and hung his head respectfully. The preacher babbled to an 'Amen' and Doodle looked up and there she was.

Vera.

Right across the hole from him.

He'd imagined her old, a crone, a withered hag; but she looked young and fit, slim and trim. To him she was no different than she had been when he first saw her, a young girl working in her father's store. But he'd mined that seam of memory to exhaustion years ago. He should never have trusted her.

She was standing beside an old man in a black suit. Why wasn't she dressed up for this? The old man had an aluminum cane, but Vera on one side and the young woman in black on the other were propping him up. There but for my own good graces go I, Doodle thought. The old man looked frail and lifeless, like the two woman on either side had sucked all the juices out of him. That's what he could've been like. Vera could have leeched him, just like that.

"...remembering our lost one, JD McKracken," the preacher was saying, reading from the cue cards tucked in his book. Doodle's ears perked up.

The old man was shaking at Vera's elbow. "Let me go closer; I want to get a look."

"You're close enough," Vera said. There had been a time when that voice would've melted Doodle to mush, but all he could hear in it now was the bitterness, and weary impatience.

"Damn it," the old man whined, "I want to get a good look at that coffin. See if they gypped me, or if it's the one I paid for."

"Well look then," Vera huffed. "Roberta's right there, isn't she close enough? Ask her what she sees."

"Charlie," the woman Roberta, told the old man, "no one is trying to cheat you. It's the one you picked."

"Is it?"

"It's the one you picked."

That seemed to calm Charlie down.

"...as we commemorate the body and immortalize the spirit," the preacher gabbled. The little one was hanging on Roberta's leg but the other two were laughing and chasing around, throwing snowballs, and kicking rocks into the hole where they clattered off the coffin lid. It infuriated him. Couldn't they show some respect? He could throttle the little shysters.

"...JD McKracken, by all accounts," the preacher said.

Vera and Charlie kept arguing.

"Should've buried him closer to town," Charlie complained.

"We've been over this and over this, it is too expensive," Vera said. "Roberta, you tell him."

The preacher had been laying it all out on the line, and Doodle had been catching most of it; their boy.

Was this why Vera wanted him here, when it was too late to do anything about it, just to rub his nose in it? He had no wife. And he had no son. They could all go twist in the wind.

The preacher went on about growing up, about Vera marrying Charles Blenheim. Across the hole, Doodle eyed the old man still bickering. Charles. Charlie. Charlie Blenheim. The preacher rattled through high school, threw in some statistics, was winding up to something -- death, finally?

Across from him, Charlie's voice faltered hoarse and stopped; he coughed, wheezed once, and collapsed in the muck clutching his chest. The women wailed in alarm.

"Lewis!" Roberta shouted. "Lu, help!" The man by the car looked up, tossed the phone into the back seat, and hurried over. Vera had Charlie by the lapels and was trying to keep him from slipping into the hole.

Doodle's cold hands came reflexively out, as if to help, from the pockets of the gravedigger's jacket; as they did a piece of folded paper, all too yellow, all too familiar, pulled out -- it wasn't there before, it couldn't have been -- and fell spinning away, tumbling down into the dark hole. Landing on the coffin lid.

Security suits scrambled around Charlie and the women, scooped them kids and all away, loading the limos. Doors slammed. Revving engines howled and all three white cars wheeled around, spewing mud and slush, speeding away.

Their passage unobstructed, the two morticians, having nothing to pack up but their astroturf, as quickly jumped into their hearse and were gone.

At the graveside the red-haired young preacher in the shabby suit was left alone, dazed as a lost sheep.

"Hello!" Doodle called out, hobbling over to him. "Crazy bastards left you!"

The preacher clutched his black book to his chest like salvation itself; his eyes were so light blue they seemed vacuous.

"Seyton's the name," Doodle said, sticking out a muddy paw to shake. "Paul Seyton. What the hell's goin' on here, anyways?"

"I should've known," the preacher said, looking off down the highway at the disappearing vehicles.

"No problem. Can give you a ride into town in my pickup."

"Hey?" The preacher seemed to notice him for the first time. "Oh, no, thank you," he murmured absently. "I only have to go to Crumby." He pointed across the valley.

"Right," said Doodle, scratching up under his cap. "So who we burying, anyways?"

"Go ahead," the preacher said, starting to walk away.

"Fill 'er up."

Doodle chased after him. "No, really. Who is this guy? What'd he die of, AIDS or something?"

The preacher stopped, looked at him, eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Why do you want to know? You want to mess with them?" He gestured vaguely up the road.

"Hell, I don't even know who they are. But I have to know. Honest to god I do."

The preacher thought about it. "Bury the box in peace, my friend. It's only wood. There's no one in it. That poor boy was lost years ago. In truth he's only recently legally deceased, but then the law does have a strange way of catching up to reality after the fact. The McKracken boy's been dead and buried in most people's minds for years. Seven years, actually."

The preacher turned and walked away.

"McKracken," Doodle repeated. Did he really have a son? Was that Vera's revenge?

He shouted after the preacher, "What happened to him?" But the man just shrugged and kept on walking.

It was impossible. A son? He jogged back over to the backhoe. How could the box be empty. Who would bury an empty box? Someone with enough dough to hire a limo fleet and a brace of bodyguards. Someone with powerful interests to protect. Secrets to hide. The conspiracy was getting bigger and bigger. Who wasn't in on it? Could he trust anyone around here, anyone connected with her?

Vera.

He'd wanted to climb down into the hole, see what the yellow paper said, but as he hobbled from the fenceline back to the hoe he looked down in the grave and no slip of paper was there. But he'd seen it, like a yellow flower dropped on the head of the coffin.

He climbed up the ladder into the cold steel cab and sat down in the operator's seat. The transmission was simple and obvious but he had to ram at the levers to figure out the hydraulics; he lifted the support pads, raised the front end loader bucket up off the ground, and jammed the machine into forward gear. Hoe tracks clanked and he lurched squealing forward. He tried to manoeuvre around the grave markers only to discover brakes and clutches weren't as simple to control as he thought.

Crosses snapped and toppled; marble headstones were uprooted, dragged under the chassis, ground into the mud by the stump pans as the machine lurched up and over them. For a moment he thought he might have to jump off, but then he managed the clutches, yanked the right levers; one track stopped, the other kept spinning. He pivoted the machine until the hoe bucket was aimed at the hole, then parked.

He got down off the machine and looked in the hole again. No yellow paper. A box.

He wanted it open. He had to see.

He climbed back up and sat down, wiggled the levers tentatively, watched the boom swing up, down, wiggling the bucket back and forth; gingerly he lowered it, teeth pointed down, lining up with the hole.

And in the hole, the box.

He wiggled the levers, found the top of the box with the teeth, scraped gently over the top to the edge; lowered the teeth down a little, trying to catch the lid. He thought he had it, rammed the lever back, heard wood crunch and snap. He got down again and went to the edge to look in, clenching himself staunch for the sight of some macabre debris.

He couldn't smell anything. He opened his squinting eyes slightly. The backhoe bucket was part-way down the hole and obscuring the view, but he could see he'd got the coffin lid open. And he could see inside, the pearl soft quilting. The cushion, for eternal repose. Empty as if it still sat in a funeral parlour showroom.

Empty.

7.

Roaring mighty as lions they arise from their trenches and charge the enemy.

Brothers-in-arms fall. Undaunted, the valiant advance, heedless of the risk, keen for the ultimate sacrifice.

Stalwartly is he with them, sweeping forward, unvanquishable. Through the deadly tangled wire without a moment's pause, past silenced machine gun nests, and into the fear-wracked trenches of the hapless foe they push on.

Blood singing in his ears, "Virtue Mine Honour," the brave McKracken cries. Bayonet fixed and poised, he leaps into the enemy trenches, hot for glory.

A shadow figure rises, fleeing. McKracken pounces, does his duty, the whetted blade driving home. He fires a shot to free his weapon.

Whistles sound the withdrawal.

He leaves the trench; they clear the wire. Back across no-man's-land the gallant dough-boys go.

Confidently he marches with them, certain he will see another dawn. He hears the shrill of the falling shell but fears not.

In the infinitesimal fraction of time between the exploding of shell and the vaporizing of soul, McKracken realizes there must be another way.

8.

"Are you sure you want to sell your car? That's like chopping your legs off." Carrot orange hair frizzed even wilder by the summer heat, Holly had come home with her after work, was at the stove stirring the broth, drinking a beer; salad was made, in the fridge.

"I'm going to need the money, Holl." Roberta sat crosslegged on the couch, a loose housedress tucked up, massaging her swollen, aching feet. "I have to put it up for sale now, while I can afford the ad. Hopefully I can get what it's worth before I have to let it go for nothing."

"I thought Lulu wanted to buy it."

"He does but he can't afford it. Law school is not cheap."

"Yeah, really. Is this ready, Bob, can these noodles go on?"

"Sure, thanks."

"Hard to picture though, Lulu in law school."

Roberta rubbed her hands lightly over her belly. "I can feel her moving, almost like a tickling inside."

"You decided?"

"What, to keep the baby? Don't be rude, Holly."

"No, no, no; I meant, to tell Lulu it's his."

"But I don't know that. And even if I did, I wouldn't tell him. He's got to want me the way I am. We are. Aren't we, baby?" Roberta gave her stomach a hug then got up to put bowls on the table.

"I can't agree with you, Bobbie. Men are best manipulated, and guilt is a powerful manipulator."

"Spare me, please."

After they ate Holly kept her company on her walk around the block; then they went back to Roberta's apartment for their dessert. As usual she was sad to see Holly go home, but Roberta knew she wasn't really alone. And Lulu would phone her when he got home from work.

Holly'd hardly been gone two minutes when there was a knock on her door; assuming Holl had forgotten something Roberta simply opened the door without checking.

The little bald man in the hallway was a shocking surprise.

It must have showed, because he started apologizing immediately, "Oh Roberta, I'm sorry, I can come back, if this isn't a good time -- "

"No, Charlie, it's all right."

"No, really, I'm sure you're busy..."

She practically had to take Charlie Blenheim by the hand and drag him into her apartment. He wouldn't sit in the living room, but insisted on going to the kitchen table; he didn't want a cup of tea, or a glass of water, or anything, but just sat there tongue-tied, glowing beet red with embarrassment.

If Roberta didn't know better, she would've assumed JD sent him.

She sat down at the kitchen table with him. "What brings you to the city, Charlie?"

"Oh, I was just in the neighbourhood, you know..."

He looked so awkward in a suit and tie; he was the sort of person really most comfortable in baggy old work clothes, doing something, fixing something. As gently as she could she asked him, "Is this something about JD, Charlie?"

"Oh, no, no," he said, waving her off, his whole body rocking back and forth with denial. "JD is, well, he's...."

For a moment Roberta thought Charlie was going to cry, but then he cleared his throat, and looked down at his shoes, and said, "I hear your car's for sale."

"Oh? How'd you hear that?"

"Linda Evans told me. She knew I was looking, and she saw your ad in the Bargain Finder and recognized your number. So she told me."

"And here you are."

"That's right," he almost chuckled. "Yup. Here I am." He glanced up at her, then down at his shoes again. "I want to buy it."

She was excited, but didn't want to let it show. He probably wanted to haggle her down to the ground.

"Well, if you saw the ad, you saw the asking price."

"Uh, no. I didn't, well, sort of, but I know that car.

Five thousand bucks. That's it. Cash. My best offer."

He took his bulging wallet out and started counting bills onto the table with a sure and steady hand.

Now she was the one who was flustered; she'd only been asking thirty-five hundred. She wasn't sure what to do. She thought about it for a moment. "I'll get the registration and write you up a bill of sale," she said.

Charlie counted the money out twice into neat piles of well-worn twenties and fifties while she wrote up the sale bill and signed it. "Sign here, Mr. Blenheim, and that fine vehicle is all yours."

He pushed the cash over to her, and then signed the paper.

She was elated. "Charlie, I don't know how to thank you enough -- "

He held his hand up to stop her, started shaking his head like he'd changed his mind. For a split-second she was crestfallen, and thought he wanted to back out of the deal. But what he said next shocked her even more.

"I want to sell her back to you. For a dollar."

"Charlie, I can't let you do that!"

He tried to say something but just seemed to cave in, his head sinking to his hands, elbows propped on his knees as his whole body quivered. "Oh, jeez, Roberta."

He was crying, and she was crying; she got them both kleenex. He still couldn't look at her.

"I tried to be a father to that boy, so help me God I did," he said, talking to the floor.

"Charlie, please, you don't have to do this because of JD. Please, take the money."

"Oh shit, Roberta, sorry, excuse me. To hell with the money, there's more important things in life than money."

She felt she owed it to him. "Charlie, this may not be JD's baby."

He looked up, surprised. "Really?"

"Really."

"Well it's a God damn good thing. Good for you, Roberta," he said, reaching for another kleenex. "Good for you. I'm glad to hear it."

"I understand if you want to take your money back."

"No, no." He stood up, seemed to be genuinely relieved and happy. "JD I can't do anything about. But you, that's different. Now write me out a bill of sale, for one dollar, and the car is yours. And don't trouble yourself. Hey, I can use it as a tax write-off."

She wrote out the piece of paper and signed it and gave it to him. He smiled wide. "God damn right," he said. "God damn right."

9.

JD can't tell anyone. How could he possibly? He is thinking the unthinkable. But he has to do what is right.

Even waking up he'd made a scene, with Jackson hot down his collar. At morning tea he could tell by the way Arch looked at him that Arch thought he was bonkers; Yopick said he was a mad man.

He doesn't care. More than anything, he wants to see the sun rise one more time. He can't explain it, but it wouldn't matter. He could die a thousand deaths, or slaughter thousands in their tens of thousands, the result would be the same. He would still be trapped.

He would still be cursed.

If he refuses to go when the whistle blew, what then? They would shoot him on the spot.

The wind tells him soon darkness will come and the cold rain fall like sleet, like the pieces of biplane flaming from the sky, like the bombs raining down all around them. He searches Jackson out while it is still daylight, finds him in a bunker reporting to a young lieutenant, a new one he's never seen before, with beak sharp nose and coal black hair; tells them both straight out, "I can't, Leo. I can't go; I can't do this anymore. I'm not going to do it, sir."

Jackson stares at him, incredulous, asking "Are you wounded?"

Ha! "What do you think?"

"Right, then," says the lieutenant grimly, pursing his lips and drawing his pistol. "Right then."

10.

Time was something Roberta no longer clocked by minutes; time was something she measured by weight, pound by pound, stepping on the scale as the baby grew within her.

The old routines of daily office bondage and free weekends marking out her life like notches on a stick changed their meaning as her belly swelled. On the weekends now she did not go out partying, but read books on pregnancy, labour, and birth, and imagined the one within her shaping and developing.

After five the office no longer existed. Putting on her coat after work she couldn't remember what she'd done that day and she didn't care. The shift only mattered until she got home and crossed the calendar day off, one paper box closer to the next doctor's appointment.

Evenings faded into restless night, sleepwalking trips to the bathroom more frequent as the child growing left less room for her bladder; smaller meals for the cramped stomach; shortness of breath with less room for lungs to expand. She was giving herself up, becoming less to make something more.

Visits to the doctor coincided with increases in clothing size. She shopped, she lamented, she bought bigger dresses. Where had the summer gone? Gardens flourished to seed, and somewhere in distant fields grain ripened. She was showing.

At first only to herself, locked in secrecy before her naked bathroom mirror, and then to Lulu's patient hands, caressing oil onto the bulge of her belly, whenever he could spare a moment between work and school. And then everywhere, to everyone, as gradually her wardrobe shifted entirely over to maternity wear.

Why hide it?

Labour Day weekend came and went. Holly and Roger wanted to come visit; Anna and Kris invited her out. Her mother phoned, her father phoned. Roberta chose to spend the time alone, in quietude of her own making. Not thinking, or feeling, or reminiscing or anticipating. But only being. Displacing herself, trying to make contact with the being inside.

She could feel it; not just the lumps and bumps of the fetus giving her the boot, but the spirit within. The love she felt for her baby, and the love she felt returned to her already.

The leaves turned and the leaves fell. Autumn frosted the dawn. She was getting bigger and bigger. She wanted to eat ice cream every day, all day long. Hallowe'en was approaching, and she dreaded it, because it gave her a legitimate excuse to stock up on chocolate.

Charlie Blenheim came to see her again before the snow came for good. He stayed for tea this time, and sat in the living room in a soft chair. He was glad she was well, but he talked a lot while she listened, and they both cried and used a lot of tissue up. Charlie was scared that JD would do himself harm; Charlie shared secrets with her he'd never told anyone, about Vera's drinking and her temper. He hinted at dark things he didn't want to bring to light about JD's father, Doodle McKracken, who'd once been a grain buyer at Jackpine.

Charlie didn't come right out and say so, perhaps because he wanted to spare her feelings, or because he didn't want to make himself out as some kind of hero, but from the way he talked around the story Roberta could only assume JD's father had run off before JD was born, leaving Vera very much pregnant and distressed.

So maybe, Charlie figured, there were reasons people didn't always know about why people were the way they were. He loved his wife. He worried about his son, whether JD thought of him as his father or not. And he missed Roberta, and told her so. She gave him a hug when he left; he felt the baby kick and went out the door beaming.

11.

They strip him of insignia and bind him in disgrace. A complement is assigned to lead him away from the front lines.

He is vilified and abused. Men whipping horses stop to point and stare. The guns thunder and roar, but he is not waiting, drinking rum. They take him to where the hammer and anvil of war has not pounded all life out of the world.

His guards turn him over and return to the front.

The sun has set. It is dark. He is at a farmyard. His new guards tie him to a tree outside and leave one man posted.

The guns have stopped. He can picture vividly what is happening next at the front but there is nothing he can do about it. Even if he rose up as a god and blinded them with truth it would go on, unstoppable.

Men pass by in the night, converse in whispers with the guard, who at intervals is replaced by another body faceless in the dark, identical in silhouette. No one talks to him. In their minds he has no right to exist.

There are lights in the farmhouse, women serving, and soft music. He watches the officers eat and drink.

12.

It was Good Friday, so it couldn't be a tavern. Taverns had to close on Good Friday. On Good Friday they locked up the pool tables and called it a restaurant.

The restaurant was dark, beer yeasty, and smoke filled; the music was pumping thumping loud. Still wearing his gravedigger's uniform, Doodle was wedged in with them tight around the table, pouring and drinking and hollering in turn, glancing frequently over his shoulder at the raised platform in the corner where the lights flashed colour and the peeler strutted her stuff, naked and jiggling.

"Hey, Julie!" the big man across the table from him bellowed.

"What the fuck d'yah want now, Jerry!" Julie the waitress shouted back from the till.

Jerry Watson took his square cap off for a moment, ran thick fingers through greasy grey hair like he was trying to massage memory into his brain, then put his cap back on. "My buddy Paul here wants to know. What the fuck happened to that kid?"

"Which kid, Jerry?" Julie rang up their drinks and filled up her tray. Doodle waited with the money to pay.

Jerry lit another smoke. "Vera 'Kracken's boy; the one that killed himself."

"I guess he died, didn't he." Julie unloaded drinks.

Doodle handed over the cash. "Keep the change."

"Died to death, just like all the rest," the little weasel woman with the coke bottle glasses said, butting out a smoke and pouring her draft glass full.

"See, Paul," Jerry rumbled, reaching for the jug, "told yuh."

"But they never found him," the ferret faced man sitting next to the weasel woman complained, looking longingly at the pool tables. "He could of just run off."

"Now why would he want to run off and leave a fine town like this?" Doodle asked.

"That's what kilt him," the weasel woman snickered. "Lived here too long."

They all laughed.

"Could a drowned in the river," Cowboy Slim drawled.

"He went gone in winter time," the ferret man said.

"Could a chopped a hole," said Cowboy Slim.

"Or took off into the bush, into the hills. Coyotes would get him," mused Jerry. "Leave no trace."

Julie came by, picking up empties, emptying ashtrays. "Leave off it, you bunch of buzzards. You give me the creeps."

Jerry gave her the finger behind her departing back.

"He wouldn't'a run off," the dark quiet girl sitting by Jerry finally spoke up. "The gravel pit."

"The gravel pit, son of a bitch, hey?" the ferret man said.

"Wisht my pasture was half that bony," said Cowboy Slim.

"How could a guy know?" said Jerry. "Could of bought it for a song, years ago."

"Hey? Gravel pit?" Doodle had been licking his lips, not listening, mesmerized by the glistening amber liquid, frothy, bubbling, alive in his glass.

They told him all about the gravel pit. It was on the land they called Vera 'Kracken's homestead.

"So it's Vera's gravel pit?" Doodle asked.

No, they all replied in chorus, it's Mister Lewis's.

"Lewis; he's the shiny one, with the body guards and the fancy cars?"

"Right," said Jerry. "Like I told you Paul, he's our M.L.A. Owns this bar -- "

"Restaurant," Slim insisted.

"Bar, bar," bawled Jerry, holding up his beer. "See any food on this table?"

"P'tatter chips."

"Popcorn."

"Restaurant, restaurant," said the ferret man. "If I can't play pool it's a rest'rant."

"Owns half the town," Jerry concluded.

"Nice cars," the dark quiet girl said.

"So this Lewis -- " Doodle began.

"*Mister* Lewis," they all corrected him.

"Mister Fucking Lewis -- " Doodle was getting pissed off.

"You got it pardner," Slim said.

"Mister Fucking Lewis bought the gravel pit from Vera McKracken -- "

"Wrong, Paul, wrong, wrong," Jerry told him. "From Charlie Blenheim."

"How does he fit in?" Doodle poured his glass full again.

"It's Vera's husband," said the ferret man. "So it was his property when they married."

"But they didn't pay the taxes," the weasel woman insisted.

"They paid the fuckin' taxes before they made the deal."

"Did not."

"Fucking well did."

"I doubt it."

"Fucking had to."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Doodle hollered, signalling Julie the waitress for another round. "So Vera married the land over to Charlie -- "

"Right," said the chorus.

"Who paid the taxes -- "

"Right, right."

"Wrongo," said the weasel woman on her way to the bathroom.

"Who sold it to Mister Fucking Lewis."

"Right," said the chorus.

"Who made it into a gravel pit."

"Right, right," the chorus agreed.

"So," Doodle said; took a drink. Wiped his mouth. "So what's the good of a gravel pit?"

Jerry told him. Fifty cents a yard royalties; kickbacks on the crushing, the hauling, the loading; Mister Fucking Lewis's percentage scams off government road contracts. Doodle was adding and subtracting, multiplying and dividing a blur of figures on a soggy coaster, then a napkin.

"Hey," Doodle said. "Hey, hey. We're talking moolah. Six, seven figures here."

"Why, fucking millions," Jerry agreed.

"So how does it tie in with this dead missing killed himself boy?"

"Maybe the earth belongs to the great spirit," the dark quiet girl said, "but JD McKracken owned that land."

"And he disappeared? And now he's legally dead?"

"Right, right."

"Wrongo, wrongo," said the weasel woman, back to her seat.

"Well," said Doodle, standing up, pushing his chair back. "Have I got a surprise for you! You know who I am? Hey? You know who the fuck I am? I'm Doodle McKracken, that's who!"

No one said anything until big Jerry asked, "Who's he?"

"Who's this then," the officer eating the apple asks the guard. "Spy? Prisoner?"

"Coward, sir."

"Hm. Yes. Could tell by the look of him. Still, he'll get his due, hey? Carry on."

Pallid grey light creeps across the sky. It will soon be dawn. He can't stop shivering. He thought they would take him away somewhere, into a barn, or to an empty field, but he is still tied to the tree in the farmyard.

There are no animals there. The guns are quiet. All his senses seem heightened. His clothes rasp against the tree bark like loud breathing; he can hear the tree roots rumbling underground.

The farm is by a road, it is light enough to see that now. A few soldiers are on the move, coming and going. No one gives him a second look.

The officer who went away is now back; four riflemen accompany him. They are waiting for the chaplain.

McKracken will not need the chaplain. He feels his spirit soaring. Soon he will be free.

14.

Sometime after midnight going on Tuesday, January twenty-fifth, 1983, Roberta Jessup woke up to minor lower back pains. Ponderously she rolled over onto her other side, repositioning the supporting pillows between her legs.

An hour later the back pains, slightly intensified, woke her again. When she went to the bathroom she turned on the light. There smeared on the tissue was part of the cervical plug, mucus pink and glistening. And when the first faint contractions came on and the water started to flow, flawlessly clear and unstoppable, she knew.

It was happening, and she definitely was not ready for it.

Her first instinct was to reach for the phone.

But she didn't pick it up; she didn't want to call Lu away from work yet, and it was still the middle of the night, not the time to call Holly.

"Calm down, Roberta," she told herself; "take a deep breath." She tried, she couldn't. Her lungs had no room; she was too excited. She tried again, trying to inhale deeply. Shallow breaths would come later, when trying not to disturb the pain below. Almost everything she'd learned at pre-nate had gone out of her head.

"Think, Roberta, think. This is just starting, there's still a long way to go." Breathe deep, let the diaphragm push on that uterus, push that baby's butt.

Her water had broke, it was just starting, it could take hours.

Days.

The rest of her life.

She put her housecoat on over her flannel nightie and went to put on water to boil. "It's just for tea," she explained to the stove, giddy, almost giggling. It was starting and it wouldn't stop until it was over.

She was dripping. It seemed to take forever but she got down on her hands and knees and rummaged under the bathroom sink until she found a dusty box of pads; she got up slowly, carefully, huffing. "There." Pad secure to clean panties, panties on; the water could flow as it liked.

The kettle whistled, boiling. "Should I call emergency?" she asked the fridge as she set the tea to steep. What for, said the fridge. "If I call them, the nurse will say to come in, because my water broke." Contractions? the kitchen table asked. "Faint. Hardly noticeable." But her back pains were steadily worsening, throbbing to a heightening crescendo about every twenty to twenty-five minutes, then subsiding.

She put on soft music; she drank weak tea, chamomile that Charlie Blenheim had picked in his backyard. She was hungry. Should she have breakfast? "What if I throw up?" If you puke, you puke, the cupboards told her. She made some oatmeal porridge, had a bit of toast, some apple, and tried to picture what was happening.

Her uterus was effacing; the womb was pulling up, back, settling like a cap on the baby's head. Then it would dilate, open to about ten centimetres wide. That would hurt more. "So the baby can come out," she whispered to her belly, rubbing softly over the flannel.

Baby was quite active. Roberta felt queasy, not ill sick, but scary sick. Except for baby, she was alone.

By five-thirty that morning the pain had moved from her back to her belly, and was starting to become serious enough to get her attention. The contractions were lasting almost a minute, and were roughly ten minutes apart. She felt moist, not sweating, but clammy. What if blood came, no, no, don't think like that. She wanted to call Lulu but he would be catching a quick nap before going to class. She held her wristwatch tight in her hand, and was nervous enough trying to relax that she lost track of time, and lost count of the contractions. Ten minutes was not a very long time.

It was almost six. Holly'd be getting up for work soon anyway, so she dialled her number.

And then they were at the hospital, in the doors, a wheelchair from out of nowhere underneath her before she could collapse. Was there paperwork? Voices faded in and out of perception as she rode the waves of pain. They said it was like having a period, but her periods were nothing like this; nothing she'd ever felt had been like this.

They were in a room. Holly was there. Roberta was hot, sweating, wrapped in the thin hospital gown. Water to her lips. Nurses came, stayed, went. The room was dim, calm. She kept her eyes closed, not dozing but being the flower that opened each time her uterus contracted and the cervix effaced.

Her breathing became shallower as the pain increased. Damp came cool across her brow. Why was she doing this? Why was she putting herself through this agony?

"The baby, Roberta, the baby." She heard Holly's voice; Holly at her bedside, hair bunched back in a frizz. A nurse, hand on Roberta's pulsing wrist, watched wristwatch, timing; strapped across the outside of her womb, monitoring, some machine translated her baby into a strip of paper.

"You don't have to talk, Bobbie, just squeeze my hand when one starts, squeeze again when it ends."

Roberta squeezed; she could feel her baby's fear, had to get near, through somehow.

Her baby. There was a reason, would be an end.

Holly was shaking her head, unsure, saying to the nurse, "Hard to tell, could be two, three minutes apart, two minutes long."

"I'm going to examine you, Roberta, to see how far you've come," the nurse explained; she couldn't feel the smooth gloved fingers going up, a delicate brush inside. "Two centimetres, Roberta," the nurse told her, "you're doing fine."

"You're doing great, Bobbie." Holly was there with her, bringing cool water to her lips.

"Baby's scared," she heard herself saying, "kicking scared." She wanted to know what time it was, six?

Roberta didn't hear herself ask anything, but heard Holly answer, "It's nine-thirty in the morning, Bobbie, you're doing just great."

She was the ocean. Baby was the waves. They were choppy, out of synch. She was losing it, had to get it back. Breathing, breathing, she was dilating, cervix on baby's head opening up, fly out little bird; she breathed shallow, away from the pain. Reclining with her knees up; walking, was that her walking? Standing up, leaning over, Holly's fists, knuckles twisting relief into the small of her back. In the bed, on one side, on the other. Nurses, doctors, interns, coming and going. Somewhere hospital sounds drifted past, she not hearing them; hearing the waves. Three centimetres, four centimetres, five. Seven.

All through the day and into another night.

Pain of contractions seemingly never ending as the baby kicked and cried, inside her she could hear the crying, was crying, tears hot, tasting salt.

Terrified that she couldn't go on, hips and legs so sore they seemed numb, moaning, oh god, "I can't do this, I wanna push!"

"No! Roberta! Not yet, don't push yet," she heard the nurse say. "Hold on to my hand, squeeze as hard as you can."

"Squeeze my hand, Bobbie, shit the bed if you have do, but don't push!" That was definitely Holly.

She opened her eyes. On the wall opposite her was a mirror and in it she was naked, holding Holly's hand on one side and the nurse on the other, squeezing, squeezing, trying to hold back.

"I've called for the doctor," she heard the nurse say.

If only she could tell her baby to wait; if only she could break through that barrier of fear.

15.

The chaplain comes, is perfunctory, and stands aside.

He thought he knew what he was doing, what he was getting himself into, but doubt and fear begin to overwhelm him in panicky waves.

Day bright enough now, the sun must be up somewhere in the grey east, he can see birds, swallows, flitting in and out of the barn; they fly to his tree; back to the barn. They know what they are doing. Building nests. He watches them, and grows calm.

They are waiting for the men on horseback to arrive, the staff officers from their meeting; he'd heard the firing party say so.

His officer, the young lieutenant eating the apple, seen for the first time only yesterday, comes over to him.

"Smoke?" his officer asks. "Blindfold?"

He shakes his head.

"Right then. Stand him up."

The firing party stands him up and props him against the tree. The men on horseback ride up; his officer confers with them, and then lines the firing party at attention; inspects their weapons.

He thinks he hears something in the distance, the rumbling tramp of marching feet.

And music.

Perhaps he is delirious. He is very thirsty. The sun is up, the swallows fly in and out of the darkened barn, to his tree and back. Surely that is enough.

The men on horseback wait; then one of them signals his young officer. His officer orders the firing party to shoulder arms.

He isn't mad; he's heard it, he has, men marching, he can see them coming over the hill, striding in time; and it is music, singing he's heard.

"'Onward Chris-tian So-o-o-ol-diers,'" the soldiers sing, "'March-ing as to-o war -- '"

As the head of the column passes by the farmhouse one of the mounted officers orders eyes right, and the marching column turns as one to watch. His officer gives the signal and the party fires their volley.

He feels the tree quiver behind him.

16.

Her doctor was there examining her. "Eight; eight and a half."

"Ten, Bobbie, hold out for ten!"

"I have to pee," she told Holly. They helped her sit up and the nurse swung the bottom of the bed down, held a bedpan. "I can't; I can't." But she did, and then the contractions were back.

Ocean rolled waves driving in crashing rhythm, surging, rolling and pounding.

"Nine centimetres," her doctor said.

How long had her doctor been there?

"I have to push," she gasped; "have to."

The nurse on one side, Holly on the other, were holding her up, helping her hold her legs back and to the sides, and her doctor calmly said, "Now Roberta, when that next contraction comes you just work with it and push; push, Roberta, with all your might."

Trying to breath steadily, when the contraction came she let it build, breathing one and out, stronger two and out, and at the third breath held it, pushing her baby out of the womb, down the birth canal.

17.

Doodle could handle no longer being famous in Jackpine, or even spending gobs of dough on stiffs he'd only just met.

But when he came back from taking a leak and saw the small squares of blank yellow paper littering the stained carpet all around their table like so much piss in the snow, conspirators obviously all of them, cursing and swinging he tried scrapping them all at once, only to find himself bounced out of the tavern cum restaurant onto a hard, cold Jackpine sidewalk.

He just wished he had his pistol in his pocket, he'd show those hicks a thing or two.

He thought he was walking back to his motel; he would've driven if he could've found the keys to his rental car, or did he still have the gravedigger's pickup?

He left the lights of town behind, walking along the road into the sleeping countryside.

Only there was no one there to sleep; no one snoring in any old farmstead feather beds, no sleepy barking old dogs. People like Mister Fucking Lewis and the big AgCorps had seen to that.

Oiled road traffic-rippled beneath his feet, dropping away as the hill dropped away, each step was a further footfall into oblivion.

"'Oh, I was the wild ro-ver,'" he sang to scare away the bears, "bears? R'dic'lous. No bears. 'I played the wild rover, no never, no more.'" But lots of scavengers, lots of coyotes, "YIP YIP YOW-OO!" No echo. Clear sky, cold stars. He reached into his suitcoat pocket for the mickey bottle, but he wasn't wearing a suitcoat and no bottle was there. He'd walked this road how many times? But nowadays gotta look out "'Cause the buggers'll mow ya down." Each lurching step taking him farther from town. Downhill he could almost run. "I'd fall and break my bleeding neck."

All he had to do was walk down the hill, across the bridge, and up the hill on the other side. But already he knew that was wrong; he will not have to. He could see the lights across the valley at the base of the hill, used to be his hill, the dust cloud rising; could hear diesel engines pulling hard and the steady hammering pounding of the crushers.

He was mad, shouting, "What the hell did you expect? Some kind of romantic bullshit? Telling me, 'Oh, Doodle, you're such a good fellow, whyn't you come round the store? Whyn't ya buy some candy.'" He stumbled, collapsing knees jarring to the blacktop; he couldn't feel it. Was he that drunk? It should hurt. There should be pain. Could taste salt blood, spitting, "Cunt! Bitch! Vera, shit...." He staggered to his feet. It wasn't that dark. The moon was out. He could see the gravel rash on the palms of his hands, grit and blood and skin hanging. It should hurt but he couldn't feel it.

"Earth born, oh yeah, sprung up from nowhere, everywhere. 'You're so hip, Doodle, not like these hillybillys. You're so smart, really cool.'

"'I love you, Doodle, we're soulmates, Doodle.' Like spirits fly each to each. Charms the savage beast; lamblike the one that once was lionous. Oh yeah, that's great, this is cattle country."

He would like to lie down in the ditch and sleep. He was almost at the bottom of the hill. "If I'm so smart how come I didn't remember what a crazy mean bastard her daddy was?" The valley was wide, the creek was narrow; he kept walking.

"'We'll fall in love and marry and live in rural piny bliss in your little cabin in the woods, charmed like blessed souls, quaint straight out of some faroff happy story.' And I fell for that?" On the bridge, leaning over, talking to the ice, "Why the hell did I get mixed up with her?" He saw now he would certainly not have to walk up the hill; there was hardly any hill left; the crushing spread was only one fenced field, a half mile away, howling loud. Lights moving, big front end loaders on the prowl.

As he approached the outfit the road was even more warped, buckled and rutted by heavy traffic; he walked through the ditch, boots crunching the brittle layer of nighttime ice, kicking, shattering destroying, until he reached the approach, climbed up the embankment, and followed the road through the fence gate.

In the shadow of a darkened van reeking of oil and diesel he watched. Two huge loaders, dinosaur mean, ripped into the hill, hauling it away; the two loaders dumped parts of what used to be a hill somewhere beyond his line of vision, into the machinery. He was aware that some transforming process was involved but understood it only vaguely; twin gen sets roared, steady bass undertone to a turbulent cacophony. He could hear a shoosh like water that was rock tumbling, shaken and conveyed; crushers' steady hammering, smashing, pounding. A tower ringed with floodlights rose high out of the power van. Against the glare he could see the silhouette of the operator leaning against an interior tower wall, cap brim down. "Ha! Dogfucker; sleeping!"

In massive letters across the side of the power van, STONE HAMMER CONSTRUCTION; up the stairs, past the gen sets deafening loud, through a flimsy partition into a section lined with electrical panels and breaker boxes. Copper feeds bolted, the bare connections were obvious. If he pissed in there there'd be some fireworks.

A steel ladder led to a trap door; he climbed up. Precariously perched, he tried to reach above his head to open the trap; it swung open.

"Hullo!" from above. An arm outstretched, a hairy fist holding the trap; he climbed up and through. There was an awkward moment when he teetered on the brink, and then the trap door dropped shut, closing the hole in the floor. He collapsed into a steel chair.

Covered hardhat to boot toe with dust and grease, the operator, a small man with a thick beard, blinked sleepily. "Howdy," he said, standing up, stretching.

"Howdy do," Doodle replied. They both watched the maze of moving machinery a moment. To Doodle it was meaningless chaos. The operator lit a smoke and sat down. "Nice night," Doodle said.

"Can't complain."

"How's it goin?"

"Purty good. Smoke?" the operator offered.

Doodle shook his head. "Pretty impressive."

The operator wasn't impressed. "Seen worse."

"I bet." Doodle stood up, swaying a little. "So. What're you doing?"

"How'd'y mean?" the operator asked, suspicious. He reached over to a console of lights and buttons; pushed buttons, lights went off; pushed them again, lights went on.

Doodle had seen nothing happen. "I used to live up there," he said, nodding vaguely toward where the front end loaders prowled, ripping up the hill.

"Oh," said the operator, as if that explained everything. Two dump trucks took turns loading from a bin, hauling the gravel away, and dumping it on a huge pile that loomed monstrous in the night. "Quite a while back?" the operator asked.

"Oh," Doodle waved one hand nonchalantly, "Years ago."

"Quite a change, eh?"

"You bet." They watched the machines work. "So. What're you doing?"

"We're taking that material there," the operator pointed to where the loaders ripped and snorted, "crushing it here," his hand whirled in a vague gesture to indicate the confusing vortex of machinery, "and piling it over there," pointing to where the trucks scurried back and forth.

"All night?"

The operator, smugly: "All day, all night, twenty-four hours a day round the clock, seven days a week all year long."

Doodle managed an impressed whistle. They watched the machines some more. The operator puffed his smoke. "You been with this outfit long?" Doodle asked.

"Hard to say," the operator said; "I bin around."

"Ever hear of a boy, kid really, McKracken, local boy, Johnny. JD, maybe."

The operator thought; answered brightly, "Yeah, by golly, yeah. Used to work with him."

"Oh yeah? What ever happened to him?"

The operator thought some more; pushed more buttons and pushed them again. Tipped his hardhat back to scratch a thick matt of dusty hair. "By golly, y'know, maybe I didn't know him after all."

"Huh," Doodle said; then offering, "I killed him."

The operator lit another smoke.

"Right up there, on that hill."

Smoking, the operator watched him, listening.

"Smashed his head in with a rock. Best thing that ever happened to him. Buried him in dead leaves at the foot of a pine tree."

The operator didn't say a thing.

Doodle looked at him. "You probably crushed up the bones."

The operator shrugged, studied his dirty nails; stood up. They blundered in each other's way until the trap door was finally open and Doodle on his way down the ladder.

"Mind your step," the operator warned before the trap door shut.

Short of breath, numb and wheezing, Doodle walked around the spread, staying clear of the machinery, over to the discard rockpile. He climbed up, sat down on it, snuggling comfortably against the cold stones too big for the crusher to handle.

He must have dozed off; an air horn blast woke him. One of the loaders loomed over him, bucket raised high, about to dump. The machine was quivering from abruptly braking. Doodle stared dumbly up at it, unable to move.

The machine slowly backed away, the bucket gingerly coming down, and ever so slowly, carefully, dumped the rocks it carried on the ground several yards away from him. As the machine turned to leave he could see its driver looking at him, the human face for a moment visible in the running lights. The machine wheeled away, speeding toward the hill.

His hill.

He stayed there on the rockpile. He had no watch. How long before the daybreak?

The machines moved, tearing at the collapsing hillside; hauled it away, ground it up; hauled it again, piled it into another hill.

They stole his hill; they killed his boy, and he couldn't do anything about it.

The land was his; would've been the boy's. Worth a fortune. They killed him for it. That woman, Lewis's wife, the one he saw at the graveyard; _she_ did it, she planned it all. With Vera's help. It all figured, the conspiracy all fit together; his land goes to Vera; Vera gives it to them, for getting rid of the boy, so she could be all alone, just like she'd always wanted. The bitch was crazy, insane. And there's nothing he could do about it. He was frozen up solid, couldn't even squirm a muscle to wriggle off the rockpile.

Sun arise...

If the sun rises it will tower over him in a rush like the sea, a lift of cresting wings, rising above the foaming deep to peak, plummet, and sentient fall, anguished and screaming...

but he will have no voice left...the sirens will wail, he knows they will come, police cars, ambulances, but it will be too late...snuggled against the boulders, rocks warming as his body will cool...they will find nothing...yet as his eyes open close themselves to the moon and stars the hand whose fingers cannot flex know that if only they could in the breast pocket of the gravedigger's jacket they would find the near-depleted pad of little yellow gum-backed Post-its.

18.

Deep green rolling, breakers peaked white and curved, surging, crashing, ebbing. This was what she'd been waiting for, and it felt good, better than she could've hoped.

"You're doing great, you're doing fine." Whose voice was that? It sounded like JD. She rested back against the nurse and Holly supporting her, opened her eyes. Capped and gowned, masked, her doctor and a second nurse waited before her, each bent over from the waist in a resting bow, arms folded on the birthing bed, watching and waiting. No men in the room. Good.

Ocean throbbed swelling deep; she drew breath.

Hand on her feeling the contraction, her doctor calm and steady, "Take a big one Roberta, deep breath, push Roberta, push hard."

Pushing, pushing, all herself channeled giving out, out, and "Aaah!" trapped breath up and free, couldn't hold anymore. Baby was moving she could feel it, it was really happening.

Gather, push, rest; and resting she was vaguely aware how tight her grip was on the women who held her. Damp cloths came and went across her forehead and chest, sips of water to her parched lips. She could smell french fries, was that crazy? The monitor strapped across her maintained its beep and chatter.

Here comes another one.

She is the sea; everything, her being, her essence, contracts, pushing, and there is nothing else, no outside or in, only strong sensations she won't call pain as the baby moves, again and again.

Nurse is beside her, coaching breath; Holly is at the foot of the bed with a flashlight, beaming up into her, excited, "I can see the head, Bobbie, I can see the head! Wow, there's hair, dark hair."

Doctor's hand firm on her, not even aware of fingers gloved slick and probing inside, "That's right, Roberta, deep breath, push, push hard honey, that's it," and whispered consultations beyond the range of her consideration because baby is rocking back and forth with each contraction, trying to slip through her pelvis, under the pubic arch, "little bit more, Roberta, harder, harder, yes."

"Got the little sucker!" Holly says.

Nurse is looking, "She's staying," confirming.

And all the sound in the world is her breathing, her heartbeat; eyes closed she knows, doesn't need to see; smells like sea salt; feels

the ocean heave

and when the contraction passes, "Feel your baby's head Roberta, feel it," doctor's hand guiding her down to touch the wet and shockingly rough relief.

Surf rolls pounding and sea birds sing high; Holly crying, "oh my god," and nurse murmuring into her ear as doctor's voice stripped strange and strained commands, "Open your eyes, Roberta, it's the baby, look at your baby,"

"Shoulder's coming,"

"One more, one more."

She opens her eyes, sees the purple berry face shrivelled and ancient between her legs, her baby, it has to be her girl

before closing her eyes one more time for the unspeakable wonder of her body in harmony with her baby emerging

and

from unfathomed depths mother water surges gushing as baby's coming out, out, out, slippery wet squirting to be caught by waiting hands, Roberta feels that joyful spasm contracting not as work or pain of labour in which she has been immersed until so familiar it cannot be, but pleasure, sensual, sexual, approaching the amazingly orgasmic, "oh, oh, oh," her lungs bellowing loud.

In that one unimaginable instant, as her baby comes out into the world and an orgasm more intense than anything she's ever felt before wracks her body shuddering on the birthing bed, past and present like sweat beaded and running drop away from her and for one transcendent moment she is seeing the future -- baby girl wriggling at her breast, suckling to strengthen and grow tall, herself mothering, maturing, the two of them living and working together in harmony, their harmony resonating outward touching others in a circle of peace, the world changed, different, better.

As they wait for the cord to quit pulsing, Holly hugging her, crying, tears streaming her face, the doctor, placing the child on her flaccid wrinkled stomach, says, "It's a beautiful baby, Roberta."

Umbilical cord, bloodless and inert, is cut; baby groping, wrinkled hands searching, mouth puckered, sucking, not connecting.

"Oh, Bobbie," Holly is crying, laughing.

Doctor intent, her nurse pouring water warm to wash the blood and fluid from between her legs. Doctor mumbles and nurse at saline IV injects something.

Contraction again, mere continuity of cramping. Another nurse has come into the room, is kneading her belly like dough as further gouts of blood gush out. Contraction and blood, blood and pain, diminishing. The new nurse takes the baby away.

"She's beautiful." Holly finds tissue from somewhere blows her nose.

Placenta slithers out into a silver bowl, is set aside on the cart beside the gleaming instruments of unused surgical steel. Warm water wash, the doctor wipes; tucks a stitch, asking, "Well, Roberta, what are you going to name her?"

She is hungry, tired. Suctioned and bundled, the baby cries, is brought back to her. She is sitting up, takes it, holds it, suddenly exhilarated. How can she forget so much pain, so quickly? It is a blur speeding into the past; now is the hugging of baby to breast, and the sting of latching on.

19.

The sun came out.

Bravely singing off to war, the column marched by with colours flying.

Horses shat and whinnied; the officers rode off.

The firing party became the burial party.

The young lieutenant with raven black hair and nose beaked pale strode briskly up with pistol ready to administer the coup; there was no need.

As the lads came forward to bury their dead, a lone Scots piper filled his lungs and loosed his highland fingers free.